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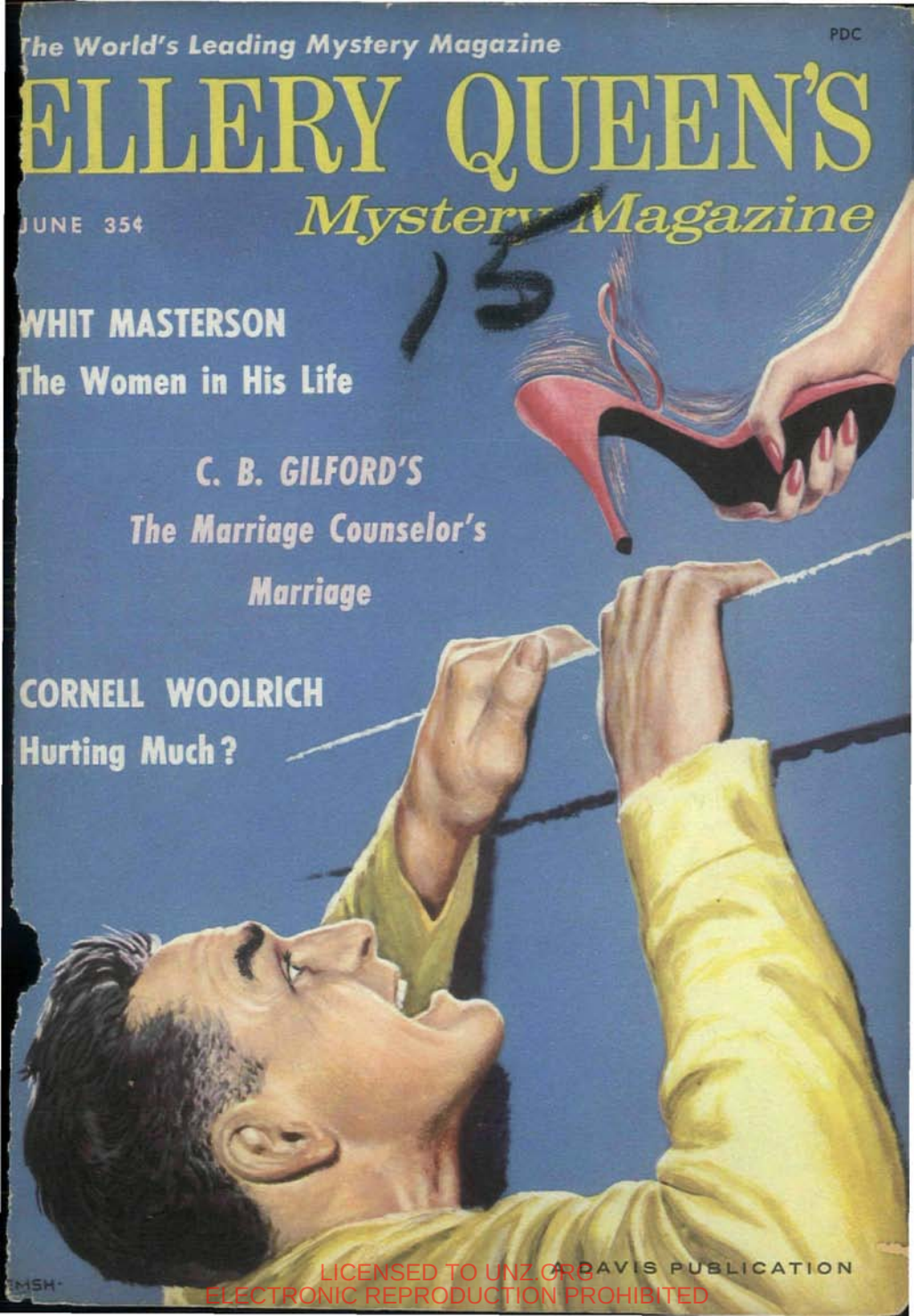
Hurting Much?



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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

***including* BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

PUBLISHER: *B. G. DAVIS* EDITOR: *ELLERY QUEEN*

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 31, No. 6, Whole No. 175, JUNE, 1958. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc. (formerly Mercury Publications, Inc.), at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription $4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, Canada and the Pan American Union; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 527 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Concord, N. H. under the act of March 3, 1879. *© 1958 by Davis Publications, Inc. (formerly Mercury Publications, Inc.). All rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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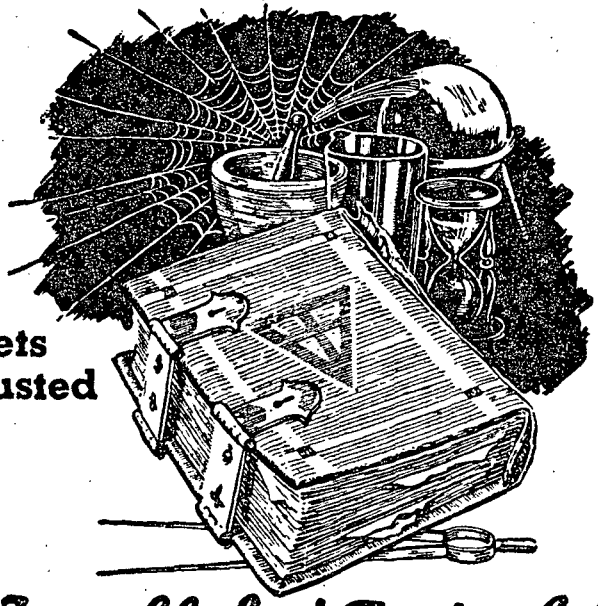

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WHIT MASTERSON**

TITLE: ***The Women in His Life***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Three young women

LOCALES: Westchester County, San Francisco, Chicago

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Widower Lewis Gilmore had three women in his life—his daughter, his model, and his fiancée—three women determined to learn the truth . . . For more suspenseful reading, we have divided this novelette into three separate parts—but you will find all three parts in this issue!*

LEWIS GILMORE WAS FOUND DEAD on a Tuesday morning in October amid the clutter of the studio in his Westchester County farmhouse. His own revolver was clutched in his powder-burned right hand; the bullet had entered his powder-scorched right temple at close range. His daughter, who discovered him, slept in the other wing of the rambling dwelling and had not heard the shot. She was even unaware that her father had returned suddenly—some newspapers said secretly—from San Francisco during the night.

Gilmore's passing was as unexpected as it was inexplicable. He had been—all those who knew him agreed—so completely alive, a vibrant dashing man whose rakish good looks made him appear younger than his forty-some years. Both fame and fortune were his. He was the highest paid commercial artist in the country, his illustrations and covers appearing regularly on the nation's newsstands. His own particular creation of feminine beauty, the tigerish Gilmore Girl, had inspired millions of American women to frustrated imitation. His private life was equally successful. Many years a widower, he had been about to remarry.

Yet—having everything to live

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for—he had apparently killed himself . . . and without leaving any message to explain his strange action.

On the morning following Lewis Gilmore's funeral three young women sat around a table in the kitchen of his farmhouse and drank coffee together in silence. At first glance it might have been thought they were sisters, or at least cousins. There was a resemblance between them that went beyond their somber expressions and the black mourning that each wore. Yet there was no kinship. The similarity of the three women sprang from the fact that they were all, in one way or another, expressions of Lewis Gilmore's taste and personality. All had loved him, each for her own reasons.

The youngest of the three broke the long silence. "I thought we were going to talk," she said. She was the dead man's daughter, Alexis, a brown-haired girl barely out of her teens, her speech and actions still reflecting the awkwardness of youth. Her face, though pale from the recent ordeal, retained its vivid prettiness and the animation that was a heritage from her father. "We're all thinking the same thing, so why don't we say it? We know perfectly well that Dad didn't commit suicide, no matter how it looks."

"The police don't agree with you," murmured the red-headed woman opposite. "Of course, they're only men." Teresa Tolan had a scornful opinion of the male sex. They fell over themselves with eagerness to win her sultry smile or a glance of approval from her oddly slanted eyes. All, that is, except Lewis Gilmore, who had been as impervious to her lure as he had been cognizant of its value. From her slightly catlike countenance he had created The Gilmore Girl. In a sense, he had created Teresa at the same time; he had made her famous as his model. In return, she had given him a childlike devotion. Gossip columnists had tried to make more of their relationship but they had remained "just good friends."

"Be fair," urged the woman sitting between them. "The police didn't know Lew the way we did." Her name was Meg Blair and she had been Gilmore's fiancée. She was a tall brunette, regally handsome with the feline grace of movement that the dead artist had admired in women. Though not as striking as Teresa nor as animated as Alexis, Meg radiated a forcefulness that made her inevitably the center of any gathering. When their engagement had been announced, people had said, "Why, of course! They were meant for each other." They were—but a bullet had intervened. Yet if Meg—more than either of the other two women—had seen her world crumble with Lewis Gilmore's death, she was

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still the most composed of them all. She sat quietly working on her nails with a long jade-handled file and her voice was almost placid. "The police aren't anxious to face the alternative. It's easier for them simply to write it off."

"Are you suggesting that we do the same thing?" Alexis demanded. "Are we supposed to close our eyes and pretend that—"

"Have another shot of coffee, pet," Teresa cut in. "Nobody's suggested anything that I've heard."

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded," Alexis murmured. "I know both of you better than that." Impulsively she stretched a hand across the table to Meg. "I've wanted to tell you—how sorry I am you'll never be my stepmother."

"I'm sorry too, Alex. I'm sorry for all of us." Meg made a small savage gesture, then winced. The sharp point of the nail file had drawn blood from her thumb. Wryly she said, "Serves me right for carrying a deadly weapon. How I wish that . . ." She studied the small instrument for a moment, holding it as if it were a dagger, then put it away in her purse. She looked around at her companions, calm once more. "We all know that Lew didn't kill himself. That means that someone else did. The question we've got to face is—what are we going to do about it?"

"The police," Alexis said immediately. "We can *make* them listen."

"They've already listened, but I'm afraid we haven't convinced them. And we won't convince them just by more talking, no matter how charmingly we do it. What will convince them are facts, evidence—some positive proof that we're not just a trio of overwrought women."

"The only time a man will accept a woman's word without proof," Teresa agreed, "is when she says she loves him."

Alexis said despondently, "Then we're licked. Gathering evidence is a job for the police. If they won't do it, who will?"

"We will," Meg told her quietly. "The three of us, together."

"Us? What can three women do?"

Teresa smiled. "Alex, you do have so much to learn about being a woman. Do you actually swallow that line about the weaker sex?"

Meg said, "We three knew Lew best. We loved him best. Of all the people in the world we're the most anxious to see his name cleared and his murderer punished. Why should we wait for someone else to do the job?"

"But how? Of course I *want* to do it—more than anything else in the world. But I wouldn't even know where to begin." Alexis' pretty face was childishly grim.

"Right here," Meg said. "In this house. Come on."

The other two women followed her out of the kitchen and down the hallway to the studio.

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It was a large airy room with slanted floor-to-ceiling windows that admitted the pale October sunlight. No showplace, it was more orderly now than when Lewis Gilmore had worked there. Its usual clutter of canvases, drawing paper, paints and easels, notes and correspondence, was arranged for the last time, as if the room were to be buried with its master. On the north wall hung his large self-portrait, the only one he had ever been satisfied with. Beneath it the women had placed a vase of flowers—bronze chrysanthemums.

They were silent for a moment, gazing around, each filled with her own particular memories. Alexis said apologetically, "It doesn't seem normal, being so tidy. But the police left it in such a mess—and then there was the . . ." She didn't finish but stared bleakly at the floor near the desk where the carpet had been freshly scrubbed.

"Too bad," Teresa muttered. "We might have seen something the police missed."

"I doubt it," Meg said. "They're skilled enough. We couldn't hope to beat them at their own job. We have to approach it in a different fashion altogether. We've got to start where the police left off."

"I don't even know where that is," Alexis admitted.

"Well, Lew flew to San Francisco last Monday on business. He didn't tell anyone what the business was, except that he expected to be gone most of the week. But the same day he flew straight back home, cutting his trip short. He picked up his car at the airport and drove back here. That means he got home about two A.M. After that, we don't know what happened—until Alexis found him the next morning. So much for the facts. Now for some guesswork. We believe that after two A.M. Lew had a visitor. It certainly would have been easy enough for anyone to get in the house. Lew never locked a door in his life."

"He didn't believe in locking up things," Teresa remembered. "He trusted everybody. He probably had fewer enemies than anyone I've ever known."

"Anyway, someone got into the house without Lew knowing it," Meg continued crisply, as if fearing to become bogged down in reminiscence. She walked over to the big desk and stood behind the empty chair. "Lew must have been sitting here. Perhaps he was dozing. After all, it had been a long trip and he never was able to sleep on a plane. I think the visitor struck him from behind, standing just about here—hit him on the right temple. Then he took Lew's own gun from the desk, placed it against the bruise, and fired it while it was clasped in Lew's hand. That would make it look like suicide and the wound would cover up the bruise where he was struck."

Alexis shuddered and Teresa

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protested, "Do we have to go into all the details, Meg? I don't see how you can talk so cold-bloodedly about it."

"I've cried my tears," Meg said softly. "I can't cry any more. All I want now is justice. I'm sorry if it sounds cold-blooded but that's the way I feel. If you two feel differently, now's the time to say so."

Alexis said immediately, "You know I'm with you, Meg, no matter what," and Teresa said, "So whoever heard of just two musketeers?"

"Let's be practical then. We all have responsibilities of one sort or the other, and what we're contemplating may take time. As for me, I can easily get a leave of absence." Meg was referring to her job as managing director of the Brinker Galleries in the city, in which capacity she had first met Lewis Gilmore. "But Alexis is in college and you're in the midst of rehearsals, Teresa."

Alexis shrugged. "I doubt if I could concentrate on school now, anyway."

Teresa stroked her throat speculatively. "You're right. I can't simply walk out on the show. I believe I'm irreplaceable but the director may not agree." From modeling, she had moved on to television commercials and now was about to make her initial plunge into theatrical work, as second lead in a new musical comedy. "Of course, I might become ill—just enough to keep me in bed for a week. I'm sure my doctor would cooperate." She smiled. "He's such a darling. So impressionable."

Meg also smiled. "It appears that we're three women on the loose."

"Do you think," Alexis asked slowly, "that we can *really* do it, just the three of us alone?"

"Yes," Meg said confidently. "I think we were meant to do it." She took a deep breath and her voice resumed its businesslike crispness. "We might as well start right now. First, I'd like to hear what you think could have caused Lew to come home so unexpectedly. And then there's the missing stamps—and the torn phone book . . ."

They talked. They talked for a long while, pausing now and then for more coffee. Sometimes there were frowning periods of concentration in which none of them spoke. They did not leave the studio but by the time the late afternoon sunlight was slanting in through the big windows they knew they had progressed at least a short distance on the road they had chosen. The trail they must follow was faint, but it was a trail. The quarry they sought was elusive, but he did exist. And it developed that there was a starting point for each of them.

They made the necessary arrangements. Alexis was the first to leave. In the morning she would be in San Francisco to retrace her father's final journey. Though

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starting much later, Teresa would be landing tomorrow in Chicago to investigate the matter of the missing postage stamps. Only Meg would be left behind to pursue alone, at the somber farmhouse, the question of the mutilated telephone directory.

They drank a final toast from the dregs of the coffee pot. But they did not toast each other, or luck, or even the man whose portrait watched them from the studio wall. Instead, they drank to justice . . .

A drizzling rain welcomed Alexis Gilmore to California as she stepped off the big airliner the next morning. Although she had slept little during the long uneventful flight from the opposite coast, she did not feel particularly tired. To some extent she could thank her youth. But most of her stamina sprang from keyed-up excitement. Not only was this her first trip west—and by far the longest trip she had ever made unaccompanied—but she had come on a mission. Alexis was still close enough to her childhood to marvel at being entrusted with adult responsibilities. Yet sobering her was the realization that, exactly a week before, her father had looked out upon this same landscape on what was to prove the last day of his life. Now she was literally following in his footsteps.

"Where to, miss?" asked the cab driver, putting her suitcase in the car.

"Fremont Hotel," Alexis told him. She consulted the receipted hotel bill. "That's at—"

"Yeah, I know the place. Your first trip here, huh?"

Alexis nodded and looked at her wrist watch. Since the itemized bill showed the time Gilmore had checked into the hotel, she would be able to determine if he had proceeded directly there from the airport or if he had made any stop along the way. She wasn't sure exactly what use this information would be but Meg had emphasized the necessity of accumulating detail and overlooking nothing—especially when they had so little information to start with. Gilmore had been reticent about the purpose of his trip, which hadn't been like him. All they knew definitely of his movements was contained in the airline's flight records—and the hotel statement Alexis held in her hand. The latter showed that Gilmore had arrived at the hotel shortly after nine in the morning. He had made one phone call immediately afterward. By mid-afternoon he had checked out. Of the approximate six hours intervening the bill gave no enlightenment. That's my job, Alexis told herself; that's what I have to find out.

They reached the city and were engulfed by it. Traffic crept sluggishly through the hilly streets, and on the wet sidewalks men and

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women rushed to and fro. There were thousands of them, each one a stranger. Alexis began to feel awed at the enormity of the task confronting her. Somehow, from the faceless multitudes that inhabited the metropolis she must find the one person who could tell her what she wished to know.

"Here we are," the driver said, pulling up to the curb. "Fremont Hotel."

It was a sumptuous establishment, neither old nor yet brashly new, with an aura of luxurious dignity that would have appealed to her father, who had traveled first class all his life. Alexis approached the marble-topped registration counter rather timidly.

The clerk, a middle-aged man in a double-breasted suit, was cordial. "Miss Gilmore?" He rummaged in his file until he found the telegram Meg had sent. "Yes, we'll be able to take care of you all right. If you'll fill out this card . . ."

"That's Room 437?" Alexis asked, as the clerk selected a key from a pigeonhole behind him. "It's important to me to have that particular room."

"You're lucky the convention's over. This morning you can have your choice of just about any room in the house." He looked quizzically at the register. "Now there's a coincidence. Just a week ago—"

"I know. He was my father."

"Oh." The clerk's face cleared with sudden understanding. "Did your father leave something behind? Is that why you want the same room? If that's the case, it's undoubtedly been turned over to—"

"Not exactly. I mean I'm not sure yet."

His puzzled expression made her regret her choice of words, particularly when it hadn't really been necessary to say anything at all. Meg would have handled it better, she realized; Meg would have avoided all the unnecessary explanations by passing the similarity of names off as what the clerk had first suggested, a coincidence. Guiltily, she remembered then that she had neglected to check the time the taxi had taken to reach the hotel, and she did so hastily now. The times matched closely and she was relieved. But as she followed the bellboy into the elevator, Alexis reflected that she certainly wasn't starting off too competently.

Alone in Room 437 she did not unpack her belongings but instead stood gazing about, seeking something that might aid her. But it was just a hotel room, pleasantly impersonal, as if it knew that while it housed many it really belonged to no one. Mechanically, Alexis went through the bureau drawers and scrutinized the closet; they were empty. More hopefully she turned to the desk and the telephone directory. Lewis Gilmore had made a phone call from this

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room. But though she examined the directory closely, she could not detect her father's bold writing among its many scribbles and doodles.

She drifted to the window and stood staring out. "What do I do now?" she wondered aloud. On the street below, a cable car went clanging its way up the hill. She envied the fact that it had a destination, that it was going somewhere while she . . .

"Well, it's certainly not going to do any good to start feeling sorry for myself," Alexis said. "What did I expect, anyway?" Resolutely, she repaired her makeup and planted her hat on her brown curls.

She began with the obvious—the lobby switchboard. The operator merely smiled helplessly at her request. "Honey, that was a whole week ago! Do you have any idea how many calls I handle every day?"

Alexis returned to the desk clerk. To her surprise she detected a glint of suspicion in his eye, as if he had been put on his guard against her. Surely, her request wasn't that strange . . . "Of course, I'd like to be of service, Miss Gilmore. But your father's stay was of such short duration—"

"It's very important. If I had some way of finding out where he went, or who he saw, it would help me so much."

"I'm not sure that he went anywhere at all. Often our guests don't bother to check at the desk." And that seemed to be that. Yet the clerk's manner was uneasy, as if he were weighing the advisability of telling her something further.

So Alexis waited. "Yes?" she prompted finally.

"Well, I seem to remember that he had a visitor," the clerk said reluctantly. "It stuck in my mind because it was such an unusual name—foreign-sounding. I don't know if that's the sort of information you want."

"It is," Alexis said eagerly. "Please—remember what the name was!"

He squinted thoughtfully while Alexis held her breath. "Pandro," he said at last. "That was it. His first name was rather peculiar too but I can't quite recall it."

"Thank you so much." She hurried across the lobby toward the bank of telephones, conscious that the clerk was staring after her, but no longer caring. She was on the trial of something, no matter how nebulous.

As the clerk had said, Pandro was an unusual name, yet the telephone directory carried two listings of it. The first was for a Haile Pandro, at what appeared to be a downtown address. The second was for Pandro Publications at the same location. Alexis hesitated a moment, toying with her dime, and then put it away. Only by meeting Mr. Pandro face to face could she hope to learn anything

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of value. She went out to the sidewalk and beckoned to the nearest taxi.

The address she sought was more of an alley than a street, a narrow thoroughfare only a block in length at the eastern end of Chinatown. The archaic buildings huddled together as if for protection against the ravages of time. Pandro Publications was located in the oldest of the group. Once it had been a proud mansion, three stories high with its cupolas, perhaps the home of one of the city's first families. Now the big high-ceilinged rooms had been cut up into smaller offices for a number of marginal businesses. In the gray gloom the relic had a melancholy appearance—like an old soldier remembering bygone glories.

Pandro Publications occupied a corner location on the ground floor. The anteroom that Alexis entered was sparsely furnished and cold, despite the electric heater in one corner. Its sole striking feature consisted of the pictures which lined every wall, both paintings and photographs, all of them exotic in theme. Alexis scanned them quickly, half expecting to discover some of her father's work. But there was none.

"May I help you?" From behind the desk that guarded the door to the inner office, a spare elderly woman regarded her with cold reptilian eyes.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Pandro."

"Is he expecting you?"

"Not exactly. It's a—well, a personal matter."

The other woman eyed Alexis suspiciously. "Mr. Pandro is very busy. If you'll give me your name, I'll find out if he can see you."

Alexis hesitated, debating whether to furnish a fictitious identity. But before she could make up her mind, the other door opened and a man popped into the anteroom. He was squat and swarthy with a thin black line of mustache and a high-domed forehead from which his hair had retreated. "By the way, Mrs. Stewart, when you make up that Philippine order—" He stopped short as he discovered Alexis and his mouth hung open in shocked surprise. There was fear mingled with the recognition and Alexis knew that she had found the man she sought.

"This girl claims she has some personal business with you, Mr. Pandro," his secretary informed him, her tone dubious. "I told her you were rather busy."

"No," Pandro said slowly, "I'll see her. Why don't you go out for your coffee now, Mrs. Stewart? I won't need you for a while."

Mrs. Stewart pursed her lips, obviously reluctant to leave. Alexis, too, would have preferred her to remain. She wasn't anxious to be left alone with a stranger, particularly one who seemed so agitated by her presence. But the other woman was already donning her

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coat and Pandro was holding the inner office door open for Alexis to enter, although they had not yet spoken a word directly to each other. She went slowly into the other room, which was no more elaborately furnished than the first.

Pandro closed the door. "Please sit down. You're Lew's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Alexis Gilmore."

"You gave me quite a shock. I mean, I read about Lew's death—and you look so much like him—"

"Did you think I was a ghost, Mr. Pandro?"

"I'm not sure what I thought." His tone was guarded. "Permit me to express my sympathy for the loss of your father. If there is anything I can do . . ."

"I think there is. Last week, when my father was in San Francisco, I believe you called on him at his hotel."

Pandro hesitated. "Yes, that is so. Did he—mention me?"

He was obviously so uneasy that Alexis decided to be cautious. "I understand it was a personal matter. I'd like to hear your version."

"More business than personal," Pandro said. "As perhaps you know, we're a publishing firm—art books. Avant garde, you might call it. Your father was an artist and he was considering investing in the firm. We merely discussed the matter in a general way. That's all there was to it."

"All?" Alexis echoed, angered at his evasiveness. "Do you expect me to believe that my father flew all the way across the country just to discuss some small investment? You'll have to do better than that."

Pandro flushed. "My dear young lady, I fail to see why I have to do anything at all. My business was with your father, not with you."

"Would you prefer discussing it with the police?"

"The police? What on earth do they have to do with with it?"

"My father was murdered."

Pandro sat down abruptly, staring at her. "Murdered?" he whispered. "Oh, dear Lord, no! But the papers said—surely you don't think that I . . . why, Lew and I were friends!"

"Then why don't you help him by telling me the truth? Why were you frightened when you saw me?"

"Was it that obvious?" Pandro sighed wearily. "All right, I was frightened—but not for any reason you may be thinking. What I told you was true, up to a certain point. Lew was maybe my oldest friend—we roomed together in college. When I got into trouble this year, he was the one I turned to."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"Money trouble," Pandro said simply. "I'm nearly broke. Our audience has always been limited. Lately, it has become more so. Lew came out here last week to give me a loan, five thousand dollars, enough to tide me over. I wanted

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him to accept an interest in the business in return but he wouldn't hear of it. He insisted it be simply an act of friendship, just between the two of us. He saved my life, Miss Gilmore. And when I saw you standing out there this morning, all I could think of was that you'd come to get the money back." Under the thin mustache his fleshy lips quirked bitterly. "Fear does terrible things to a man. I didn't even send flowers to the funeral because I didn't want to call myself to your attention. That's how I repaid Lew's friendship."

"I understand," Alexis said gently. "And I didn't come about the money. Dad would have wanted you to keep it." It had been so like her father, the warm-hearted gesture with no thought of repayment or desire for publicity; it explained why he had been reticent about the purpose of his trip. "But perhaps you can repay in another way. Something happened here, in this city, that caused him to be killed. You saw him, you talked to him. Maybe you know what it was."

Pandro was silent for a moment, considering. "I desperately wish I could say, why yes, it was this—or it was that. But, honestly, I can't. Lew phoned me when he arrived. I met him at his hotel. We had lunch together, we talked, he gave me the loan . . . and then we said goodbye. Perhaps he had other business. I don't know."

"I do," Alexis murmured. "According to the time schedule, Dad went directly back to his hotel, checked out, and caught the next plane home. Doesn't seem to make much sense, does it? That is, unless—" She stopped, embarrassed.

"I understand. Unless I'm lying."

"I didn't really mean that. May I ask a favor? Could you take me to lunch—at the same place?"

"I'd be delighted," Pandro said, reaching for the phone. "It's the very least I can do."

Although he telephoned ahead for a reservation, they were still forced to wait a short time. The ornate dining room of the Gold Coast was only moderately filled. But Alexis wished one particular table for two in a particular corner.

"In a way I do feel something like a ghost," she confessed when she was finally seated in the same chair her father had occupied. "Except that I'm not sure who I'm supposed to be haunting."

"Perhaps it's that young man over there." Pandro indicated a table at her back. "He's scarcely taken his eyes off you."

Without turning, Alexis scanned the dining room in the mirrored wall behind Pandro. Behind her, but out of earshot, a man was lunching alone. He looked about thirty, a stocky grim-faced fellow with black curly hair and a prominent scar on the back of his right hand. His piercing eyes met Alexis' reflected gaze for a moment and

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then he turned his attention to the menu. "I've never seen him before," she told Pandro. "Has he really been watching me?"

"Surely you must be used to male attention by this time."

Alexis shrugged. The young man's features were too hard for her taste. Yet Pandro was right: he was staring at her. She forgot her admirer as a new idea struck her. The wall she faced was a huge expanse of silvery glass that mirrored the entire dining room for anyone in her chair. "I suppose it's a foolish question—but has that mirror always been there?"

"As long as I can remember. Why?"

"From here I can see everyone in the dining room, just as well as if I were facing them. That means Dad could have done so too. Do you remember if there was anything special going on here that day?"

Pandro pursed his lips. "The place was even emptier than it is today. Oh, there was some sort of luncheon meeting, a banquet or something, at the other end of the room—if you could consider that special."

"Did Dad mention it?"

"No, he didn't. We were talking mostly about my problems, I'm afraid. I have a new book in the works, on Polynesian art, and I was telling him something about it. He was doodling on the tablecloth—it was a habit of his."

"Yes, he ruined a good many tablecloths that way." She noticed that Pandro was frowning. "What is it?"

"It just occurred to me. What Lew was doodling was a skull. I remember I made some joke about it but he didn't even answer me. Instead, he had a very peculiar expression on his face, now that I think about it, almost like fear. Do you suppose he could have had a premonition of what was going to happen?"

"A skull," Alexis repeated. "And he didn't explain it at all?"

"Not a word. And right after that he said he had to leave and we said goodbye. Where are you going?"

"I want to talk to the headwaiter." Alexis didn't explain but hurried across the dining room, leaving her companion to follow. What Pandro didn't know was that Lewis Gilmore, though an inveterate doodler, didn't draw aimlessly. He was too much the artist for that. He drew what he saw, sometimes in cartoon, sometimes in grotesque—but always with a model.

The headwaiter was puzzled but polite. "The tablecloth from last Monday? I'm afraid not, madam. Our linen is laundered daily."

"But suppose it had been soiled permanently, with ink."

"In that case the cloth would simply have been destroyed."

Alexis nodded in disappoint-

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ment. But there was still another chance. "I know this is asking a lot but do you happen to recall who was eating lunch here last Monday? It's very important."

The headwaiter smiled helplessly past her at Pandro, as if inviting his commiseration in this fantastic feminine vagary. Pandro said, "It *is* very important."

"But it's impossible for me to remember—"

"There was a banquet," Pandro prodded. "Some sort of meeting."

"Last Monday? Yes, of course—the advertising council's monthly meeting. But I have no idea who attended and who did not."

"Wasn't there a reservation list?"

"Each group handles its own reservations. The chairman merely tells us the number to expect. I'd suggest you ask him. I believe it was Mr. Lamarr, Mr. John Lamarr. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

"Thank you," Alexis murmured and let him escape. She held out her hand to Pandro. "Well, I guess this is goodbye."

"But you haven't even touched your lunch."

"I can eat later."

Pandro held onto her hand a moment. "Be cautious," he urged. "I believe I understand your purpose. But you are very young—and I can't forget that just a week ago I said goodbye to your father at this very spot."

Alexis tried to smile. "They say lightning never strikes twice."

"My dear, lightning doesn't have to."

Pandro's warning remained in her mind as she taxied across the business district toward the address the telephone directory listed for John Lamarr. The game she was playing could be a dangerous one. She had better heed Pandro's advice and proceed cautiously with this stranger. Perhaps, she thought, if I pretended to be a reporter for some magazine . . .

By the time she reached the office door that was chastely lettered *John Lamarr & Associates, Advertising & Public Relations Consultants,* Alexis had concocted what she considered a plausible reason for wangling the guest list of last Monday's banquet. But it was wasted effort. Mr. Lamarr was not in.

"Perhaps I could wait," she suggested to the receptionist.

"I wouldn't advise it. Mr. Lamarr's out of town and I don't know when to expect him back."

"Oh?" Alexis probed deeper. "I thought I saw him in town this morning."

"Must have been somebody else. He flew east last Monday. Would one of the other executives do?"

"No," Alexis said. "My business is with Mr. Lamarr."

From a telephone booth in the lobby she confirmed what the receptionist had told her. John Lamarr had booked a flight to New York, only an hour behind

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the plane that had carried Lewis Gilmore home. Gripped with a feverish excitement, Alexis returned to her hotel and put in a long distance call to Meg at the farmhouse. She poured out all the details she had learned.

"Alex, you've done splendidly," Meg said when she finally paused for breath. "Of course, it might be just a coincidence. I'll see what I can find out here."

"Have you heard from Teresa?"

"Not a word, but I expect to. You sit tight for a while and one of us will call you, we're on our way."

After she had hung up, Alexis repeated Meg's words to herself with a warm glow of pride. Thanks to you, we're on our way. But now what was she to do? As if in answer, the telephone rang.

Haile Pandro's voice sounded worried. "Something's happened I think you should know. I just returned to the office. Mrs. Stewart tells me that a man has been here, asking some rather peculiar questions—about you and me."

Apprehensively, Alexis asked, "Who was he? What did he want?"

"I'm not sure. Mrs. Stewart thought he was tough-looking. Hold on a minute." His voice became muffled as he spoke to someone off the phone. "Mrs. Stewart has just remembered—this chap has a bad scar on one hand. That sound like anyone you know?"

"Why, no," Alexis began, and then stopped. The grim-faced man in the restaurant—he had a scarred hand . . . Slowly she said, "I'll have to think about it. Thanks for calling me, Mr. Pandro."

"Remember about the lightning," Pandro told her. "Be careful."

Alexis bit her lip, puzzled. Why was the man with the scarred hand interested in her movements? Then a new idea struck her. Perhaps it was not she, but Haile Pandro, who was being watched. If so, that would indicate that Pandro had not told her the truth, or at least not the complete truth.

Meg had instructed her to sit tight but Alexis was fidgeting with curiosity. She couldn't leave this new development alone. She put on her coat once more and went down to the lobby. It was nearly empty and though she covertly scrutinized every corner, she did not spy the dark young man. She lingered for a while, pretending to consult the telephone directory, then told the desk clerk that she was going out.

It was raining harder now but Alexis disregarded the waiting taxis. Instead she struck off down the hill, walking briskly as if she had a destination in mind. She turned corners at random, paying little heed to her direction. As often as she dared, she glanced behind, hoping to detect someone following her. But through the gray slanting rain it was impossible to tell.

A good deal of the time she kept

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her head down to avoid the pelting drops and when, after twenty minutes, she paused to get her bearings, Alexis discovered that she was uncertain of her whereabouts. Without realizing it, she had left the business district and its swarm of foot traffic. Now she traversed a gloomy warehouse section in which she found herself alone on the streets, except for an occasional passing truck. The air smelled heavily of salt and a short distance away she could glimpse the leaden waters of the bay. I guess I'd better give up and go back, she decided. But in which direction lay the hotel? Chagrined, she realized that she was lost. It was no cause for panic; she would easily be able to find her way back but . . . what was that?

From behind her came the sound of footsteps on the sidewalk. The sound was not particularly ominous except to Alexis' tightly strung nerves. She began to walk rapidly toward the harbor; the footsteps behind kept pace. She couldn't bring herself to glance backward, not wanting to see her pursuer. Instead, she looked desperately about for some place to hide.

She reached the corner, turned it, and saw the inviting mouth of an alley. A moment was all she had out of sight of her pursuer, but it was enough. Alexis plunged into the narrow sanctuary. She sucked in her breath with dismay. The alley was a dead end, terminating a dozen yards away in a loading dock.

She was in a trap of her own making.

Some trash barrels stood against one wall of the alley. Alexis crouched behind them as the footsteps drew closer. Her heart was pounding as she hoped she would go undiscovered. And for an instant she thought her ruse had worked, for the sound of footsteps stopped. She peered cautiously from behind the trash barrel and her stomach seemed to congeal.

He was standing at the mouth of the alley, looking at her, his big body nearly filling it, like the cork in a bottle. The distance was too great to see the scar on his hand but Alexis remembered well the grim lines of his face. She had learned what she had set out to learn, but in this terrified moment she could get no satisfaction from her success.

He began to walk slowly toward her, a figure of infinite menace . . .

(continued on page 58)

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **C. B. GILFORD**

TITLE: ***Marriage Counselor's Marriage***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *John Roderick was a successful marriage counselor. He believed every marriage can be rescued by two mature, intelligent people. And Roderick was not only mature and intelligent, he was forgiving . . .*

"SO YOU SEE, IT ADDS UP TO WHAT I've been saying all along." John Roderick tipped back in his swivel chair and spoke authoritatively, but also with real sincerity. It was that combination perhaps which made him so convincing, and therefore successful. "Marriage is a partnership and is only what the two partners make of it. Give and take, that's all there is to it."

The little couple sitting in front of his desk seemed spellbound. The woman's eyes were a bit red from weeping, but a starry look was now creeping into them. Her thin, rough hands began to twist almost shyly at a corner of her shabby coat. The man, in overalls and with a day's growth of beard, was trying vainly to swallow the persistent lump in his throat. His calloused hand stole over to one of his wife's and clutched it.

"What do you say, honey," he began thickly, "shall we give it another try?"

The woman was too full of happiness to do more than nod.

John Roderick beamed paternally on the pair. "Now that's what I like to hear," he glowed.

The little man held on to his wife's hand. "We sure thank you a lot, Mr. Roderick," he stammered. "You sure helped us. By the way, sir, are you married?"

John Roderick patted his well-stuffed paunch. "I am that, sir," he said. "And happily, I might add. Looking at my own marriage professionally—as an objective coun-

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selor, that is—well, I just hate to brag . . ."

At home in their seventh-floor apartment Mrs. Verna Roderick went through the routine just once more. The French doors leading onto the little balcony with its low white-iron railing were open despite the chill of the afternoon. In the bedroom the bed was made, but Verna lay on it anyway. And she was fully dressed.

She was still a moment, then glanced quickly toward the balcony. The right time seemed to arrive. She moved stealthily, swinging her legs off the side of the bed. The well-oiled springs made no sound. She glided across the rug swiftly, noiselessly. Then, just when she reached the doors, she sprang. It was a lightning motion, with the palms of her hands thrust out in front of her, and it took her all the way to the iron railing.

A casual onlooker might have been mystified. Or, if he had had a morbid imagination, he might have come to the dismal conclusion that she was pretending to push someone off the balcony. Or perhaps even . . . practicing . . .

The November dawn came late and sluggishly. Just a dull grayish pink haze in the eastern sky. But it woke John Roderick. He stared it the celing, blinking three or four times to accustom his eyes to the half light. Then he heaved off the blanket with one vast movement, rose, and crossed the room barefooted. Arriving at the French doors he flung them wide. The early air whistled past his silk pajamas but left him undaunted. He strode onto the balcony and stopped just in front of the low railing. Then he breathed deeply, flung his arms wide, palms outstretched, palms back to his chest —squat, rise—out, in—

Calisthenics.

In the bed Verna Roderick lay fully awake. She too took a deep breath. Then gently, ever so gently and quietly, she pushed aside what little part of the blanket was left on her after her husband's extravagant rising. Her feet slid to the floor. She padded over the soft rug to the French doors.

Squat, rise—out, in—

She timed it well. As he rose from the squatting position, he was poised for a second on the balls of his feet—a perfect fulcrum. She sprang toward him at precisely the correct instant. Her hands were outstretched, and they hit him at the shoulder blades. He somersaulted over the railing.

But he didn't fall. That was the unexpected part of it. For a man of his years John Roderick was in fine physical condition. As he flipped across the railing his hands flung about, searching for something solid. One of them found it —the railing itself. The rest of him sailed on over. His shoulders and

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back crashed against the façade of the balcony with a heavy thump, just a little less than bone-breaking. He hung there, facing the outer void. One-handed.

"Verna!" he screamed. But of course it wasn't a scream. There wasn't enough air left in his lungs to muster a scream.

She stood above him, watching with a kind of fascination as his other hand reached up for a hold on the railing. She waited too long. The groping fingers had a chance to curl around the railing. Only then did she think to fight him.

She tried prying his fingers off at first, but his hold was tight and desperate. She pounded her fists on his knuckles. When that failed to dislodge his grip, she ran back into the bedroom for a weapon.

But there too her timetable was a trifle slow. By the time she returned to the balcony with her hairbrush, he'd somehow turned himself around and was now hanging with his face toward her. She noted the sweat on his face.

She felt no pity. She used the hairbrush, pounding first at his hands and then at his head.

And she might have succeeded if John Roderick had not had a flash of true inspiration. He might have threatened, pleaded, begged, all in vain. Instead he warned. "Verna," he gasped, "people can see you. You'll be arrested for murder . . . broad daylight . . ."

It wasn't broad daylight. But there was some light. And some other early-rising apartment dweller just might be witnessing this struggle. The realization chilled her more than the morning air. With a sob she fled back into the bedroom.

Left alone, he still required his last ounce of failing strength to haul himself over the railing. But he managed it, collapsing in a heap on the floor of the balcony. Then he half rose and crawled inside, to fall on the rug and lie there for a long while.

In the time that passed he should have been up and about, shaving, dressing, breakfasting, getting ready for his day. But his terrific exertions had left him with an overpowering weakness. He couldn't even think.

Eventually, he struggled to one elbow. And he saw Verna there, still in her nightgown, sitting on the side of the bed, watching him intently, waiting for him. She'd been crying, and the tears had dried unattractively on her cheeks. He realized what kind of tears they'd been. Not of sorrow or remorse. But of frustration, defeat.

"Verna," he began, "how could you?"

She didn't answer.

"Verna," he said, "you tried to kill me."

She didn't attempt to deny it.

"But *why?*"

"Because I hate you."

In his weakened condition he

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could only splutter, "I . . . I can't understand it. I don't believe it . . ."

"I don't expect you to believe it, John," she said, "but it's true."

He raised himself laboriously to a kind of sitting position on the floor. "You must be out of your mind, Verna."

"No, I'm completely sane."

"Is there another man?" He couldn't imagine the possibility, and it hurt him to ask it, but he had to.

"There is no other man."

"My insurance?"

"There isn't enough to make it worthwhile."

"Then what on earth . . ."

"I told you, John. I hate you."

Impelled by a new desperation, he dragged himself to his feet, using as support the bed she sat on. "That's ridiculous! It just isn't true! Why, *why* should you hate me?"

"I have a whole list of reasons."

"Name one."

"I hate you because you're John Roderick."

He had to clutch the bed. "But what have I ever done to you?"

"You married me."

He rose and staggered to the dresser, then stared at himself in the mirror. Unshaven, disheveled, pale, he had the look of a broken man. As he gazed into the mirror he saw Verna appear behind him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Do?" He echoed the word stupidly.

"Are you going to call the police?"

Although he didn't know why he gave the answer he did, the very tiniest germ of an idea must have already popped into his mind. "No," he told her, "I won't call the police."

John Roderick sat in his office and refused to see anyone that morning. He just crouched in his chair and tried to take stock of the new situation. From the walls his two stock business mottoes looked down mockingly. *There is no marriage which can't be rescued* and *Where there's life there's hope.*

He considered them for a long time. About eleven thirty he exclaimed aloud—little bursts of decision—and went on thinking and planning.

He accepted an invitation to lunch with Elliott, the other male counselor at the Family Center. When they sat in their little secluded corner of the coffee shop he explained his disrepair to his colleague. "Got up in the dark last night and tripped over a chair. Got these bruised knuckles and this bump on my head."

Elliott, a thin, wizened little man, didn't question the explanation. Instead he discussed a case he was handling—a case of incompatibility.

Roderick listened for a while,

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till finally he could restrain himself no longer. "You know," he interrupted finally, "I've got a stickler of a case myself. It's incompatibility in a general way, I suppose. But it's gone pretty far. The wife tried to kill the husband."

"Really!"

"Don't know what I'm going to do about it yet."

"You mean you're really trying to solve it?" Elliott was admiring.

"Would be a feather in my cap, wouldn't it?" Roderick managed a smile, even though his head still hurt. "If I could take a couple where murder was actually attempted and make a pair of lovie-dovies out of 'em . . ."

"John," his companion stated unequivocally, "if you could do that, you'd be a positive genius."

When John Roderick returned to his seventh-floor apartment that evening he came purposefully, with a lot of little file cards stacked neatly inside his head. All numbered, catalogued, and apropos. Also he came with a smile.

When he let himself in with his own key he found Verna waiting for him in the living room. She was sitting very rigidly in a straight chair, and she was wearing a hat and coat. Beside the chair was a suitcase.

"What goes on here?" he asked with somewhat forced joviality.

She rose primly. "I expected you'd be bringing the police."

"The police? Rubbish."

"And if not, leaving seemed the only decent thing for me to do under the circumstances." She picked up the suitcase.

He bounded across the room and stopped her. "I won't allow it," he said. "You're my wife after all."

She looked up at him with a mixture of scorn and surprise. "After *all?"*

"You're referring to that unfortunate little episode this morning?" He was busying himself, in a rather masterful manner, with helping her off with her coat. "My dear, I've thought about that little matter, and I've managed to put it into its proper perspective. It was only a symptom. Hatred, violence—they're only symptoms, you know, of a more deep-rooted trouble. They are effects, not causes. You were merely striking back. You see?"

She let him go on.

He went to the sideboard and poured drinks. Two, where before he'd always poured just one—for himself. He brought one to her. Before he lit his own cigarette, he offered her one. He even lighted it. Then he led her to the sofa and sat down beside her.

"We are two mature, intelligent people. We should be capable of solving our differences. I should be able to, at least—in my profession, you know. And we should not be defeatist in our attitude. There is no marriage which can't

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be rescued." He tried to eliminate the quoting effect from the last pronouncement.

She merely watched him over the rim of her glass.

"Now, as I said, you were merely striking back. Analyze that, if you will. It's rather important. You were striking back at me, at something I did to you. Therefore, I am the offender, and I must take full blame. I say that in all humility, my dear. The whole thing was my fault. Let me start off by apologizing."

She was wary as she nodded her acceptance of the apology.

"If you hated me, there must have been reasons. I do you the honor of thinking of you as a reasoning woman. Reasoning—reasons—you see? You were right, I was wrong. But we shall correct that. You shall see. If you loved me enough to marry me at one time, then you should be able to love me again—granted, of course, that we can get rid of those reasons. All of which, my dear, I've analyzed completely, and determined upon methods of correction. I shall become again the lovable man you once married."

A little card—Number 346—popped suddenly into his mind, and he read it silently to himself. *Wife says she can't stand husband's persistent chatter. She too wants to talk sometimes, but he's always telling her about his own problems.*

John Roderick smiled. He sat back, nestled himself into a more comfortable position, and twirled his glass meditatively. This would be subtle. "Now, my dear," he began expansively, "what have you been doing today?"

The Rodericks were getting ready for bed when he pulled card Number 215 out of his brain. *Husband is too much the athletic type—bowling, swimming, calisthenics, etc. Wife doesn't share his interests.*

"Darling," he said, "we're going to sleep a little later tomorrow."

She paused in the brushing of her hair. "Why?" she asked.

"Well, I'm going to eliminate those calisthenics of mine."

She turned to him with narrowed eyes, and he thought he detected the barest trace of a smile on her lips. A rather superior—annoying—smile.

"I know what you're thinking," he said quickly. "You think I'm afraid to go out on that balcony. Ridiculous! You underestimate me, my darling. But I'm aware now that those early-morning exercises annoy you. I open the door and the cold air rushes in and you don't like it. Maybe you don't like the sight of me keeping fit when you don't have the energy to join me. No, my dear, I won't do any more of those exercises until you decide some time you'd care to join me—then we can do them together."

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She expressed no gratitude—merely turned back to the mirror and continued brushing her hair. He watched for a while without complaint, even though she was an abnormally long time at it.

Damn fine-looking woman, he commented to himself—a woman to be proud of. Had good taste in picking her, even if I do say so myself.

Then they lay together in the darkness. And he couldn't resist saying it. "About those exercises, though."

"What about them?"

"That wasn't much of an idea of yours."

"What wasn't?"

"Trying to push me off the balcony. You could have been seen, you know. And you wouldn't want to go to the gas chamber or spend all your life in prison for killing me, would you? Take all the profit out of it—trading life with me for life in prison. Surely I couldn't have been as bad as all that."

She was silent in the dark.

"Awful mistake. Of strategy, I mean. I'm speaking just of the strategy of the thing, mind you. Very clumsy way of doing it. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, I agree," she said finally. "It was clumsy."

"Stupid," he said. "Very stupid." He was drifting off into sleep already. He'd had a hard day. Altogether too much exercise. "Stupid of you, darling . . ."

He consulted card Number 422 the following Saturday, which was a day off for him. *Husband is unnecessarily stingy in giving wife money for personal, private expenses. Makes sufficient salary. No excuse.*

"Verna," he said at breakfast, "why don't you go shopping today?"

She eyed him with her normal coldness. "Why?" she asked.

"Well, you haven't done much shopping for a long time. Woman needs it for morale. Needs to go out and blow a little money on herself. Doesn't matter what for. It's the letting go that counts, the freedom from restraint. What do you say? Take the checkbook and feel free. Spend as much as you like, dear—the sky's the limit."

"All right," she said, watching him closely.

She was ready in an hour, very neat and trim in her tailored gray suit and tiny black hat. He walked to the door with her. "You look splendid, my dear," he told her.

There was perhaps just a hint of softening in her face. "Thank you, John." She almost smiled.

He took that heartening occasion to give her an affectionate peck on the forehead. She did not respond. "There now," he said, "isn't that more like it?"

She lifted her eyes. There was even the vaguest seduction in them.

"Aren't you ashamed now?" he persisted.

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"Of what?"

"Of even thinking about murder. I'm not such a bad guy, am I?"

She spoke softly, throatily. "Maybe not, John."

"I developed certain deficiencies as a husband—I admit it. But they're being corrected now—don't you agree?"

"Maybe."

"Takes time, of course."

"Yes, it takes time."

"Can't reconstruct a whole personality overnight, you know."

"No, you can't."

He felt so good about it that he gave her another affectionate peck. "Be sure to spend a lot of money now, sweet," he told her.

She gently squeezed his hand as she went out the door.

Mrs. Roderick didn't return till very late in the afternoon. She was loaded down with packages, and she showed him the contents. All very gay things, especially the hats. He noted this with inner glee. A woman showed her mood by her taste in clothes. Gay clothes, gay mood. He almost clucked with satisfaction.

When he suggested that since she must be tired, he should take her out to dinner, she refused. Instead she went to the kitchen and busied herself there for a long time. A special dinner, he told himself. He heard her humming snatches of an old tune. All good signs to a professional marriage counselor.

The meal turned out to be one of the best she'd ever cooked. He told her so, and she smiled shyly.

"Strange thing about all this," he confided. "You tried to kill me and came very close to succeeding. And here I am, appreciating you much more than I did before."

Her smile became positively bewitching. "You mean I'm forgiven, John?"

"Nothing to forgive, darling. As I said, the whole thing was my fault. You had every right to take stern measures."

"Not stern, violent," she corrected.

He shrugged. "I deserved it anyway. But also as I've said, the really unfortunate thing about it would have been that the police would never have understood. As I understand, that is."

"And they wouldn't have forgiven me."

"Certainly not."

"So you saved me, John."

"By George, I did, didn't I?"

"How can I ever thank you?"

The evening went swimmingly. He had a pleasant half-hour's nap in his easy chair while she did the dishes. Later they sat together, though not close together, and listened to symphony music. It made him pleasantly drowsy.

He watched her through half-closed eyes. She was curled up at the other end of the sofa, her legs tucked under her, her eyes gazing dreamily at the ceiling. Pretty, he

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thought. After a dozen years of marriage, she's still pretty as a schoolgirl.

Another card in his catalogue clicked in his mind. Number 433, his trump card. *Husband all wrapped up in his work. Neglects wife, not out of malice, but out of sheer forgetfulness. Wife literally starved for affection. Husband needs to become a lover again.*

"Verna . . ."

"Yes?"

"I've never seen you look more beautiful."

"Really?"

"Something ethereal about you. Or maybe it's a sort of exaltation."

She glanced coquettishly in his directon. "Why, do you think?"

"I don't know. People say brides are always beautiful. A woman seems to look her best at a moment of great happiness."

He edged toward her.

"Maybe that's it," she said.

He moved another few inches, and his heart pounded a little. He put out a hand toward her.

"Darling . . ."

But she didn't take his hand. She uncurled herself instead, eased off the sofa, and walked away from him, around the sofa. There was a slight sinuousness in her walk that he'd almost forgotten. She paused behind him for a moment, giving him the full effect of her eyes. Then, without a word, she walked into the bedroom and closed the door.

Ah hah! He almost said it aloud. Analysis correct. Lots of minor grievances, but here was the principal one. Just wait till Elliott hears about this. And maybe a few other people, too. With fictitious names, of course.

He lurched to his feet and crossed to the wall mirror. For a full minute he stared at the image reflected there. Not too bad a face. A bit sleepy-looking—from the heavy dinner and the quiet evening. But the sleepy look became him in a way. You old devil, you, he told the image. This was what she wanted all the time. Romance.

But he stopped to fortify himself with a drink. Two, in fact. He'd hoped the whiskey would wake him up a bit. It didn't. But it would, he was sure, make him more glib, more charming. He had to be at his very best. He took a quick third one too.

She was sitting up in bed, he found, wearing a negligee he'd bought himself—when, he didn't quite remember. And she had the look of a cat, curled up softly, her eyes glowing in the dim light.

But he lurched again before he got to the bed. So he staggered to the dresser instead, which was closer. Leaning there, he used his free hand to tear open his collar and tie. Verna gave no sign of noticing anything unusual

But what he needed first was air. "Do you mind?" he asked her.

"Mind what?"

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"If I open the French doors . . ."

He didn't wait for her permission. He rushed across the room like a diver cleaving for the surface. He threw open the doors and let the cold night air drive against his face. Until he remembered.

"No calisthenics." He grinned back at her. "Just a breath of fresh air." He saw her shiver in the negligee. "Sorry, have to . . ." He stepped out onto the balcony.

Much better there. He felt revived a little, enough to curse himself for taking those three drinks. They'd hit him hard. He'd have to sober up quickly. It was terribly important . . .

He heard her behind him, and he turned. She was barefooted and wearing only the negligee. "You'll catch cold . . ." he began.

She shook her head.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," he started to explain. "Took a couple of drinks after you left me . . ."

"It isn't the drinks," she told him.

"Isn't . . . ?" He felt a kind of numbness. The bed . . . if only he could lie down for a while. But his legs didn't seem capable of carrying him to the bed.

"I bought it when I was out today," she said. "Do you mind? I put it in the dinner—in the gravy and the salad dressing both."

"You put what . . . ?"

"A sedative."

"But I don't need a sedative!"

"Something to keep you quiet, darling."

"I don't want to be . . ."

"While I push you over the railing."

He stared at her without belief, numbness flooding over him.

"You were so right, John. I tried to push you off at the wrong time. Someone could have seen me. But it's dark now . . . And I'm sure they won't poke around in a body that's obviously dead from falling seven floors."

She seemed to be circling before him. But he knew she wasn't moving. "But I corrected everything—all my deficiencies—talked too much—my morning exercises—too close with money. And I was just ready to correct the last one. I was going to make love to you."

"It won't be necessary."

She moved a step toward him.

"Everything—"

"Not everything, darling. Not the real one, the most important one. Your vanity, darling. Your complete certainty that you can correct anything."

She gave him only a very small push, really. Sufficient, though . . .

On the way down a file card flashed into his consciousness. Number 504. *Husband an overbearing, pompous, conceited, egotistical, arrogant boor. Wife can't stand his guts.*

Why hadn't he thought of looking in the dead file?

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**SHIRLEY JACKSON**
TITLE:	***This Is the Life***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	En route to Perryton, United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*A tender, sensitive, perceptive story of a nine-year-old boy's first contact with a criminal—by the author of* LIFE AMONG THE SAVAGES, RAISING DEMONS, *and that justly famous short story, "The Lottery."*

"HONEY," MRS. WILSON SAID UNeasily, "are you *sure* you'll be all *right?*"

"Sure," said Joseph. He backed away quickly as she bent to kiss him again. "Listen, *Mother,*" he said. "Everybody's *looking.*"

"I'm still not sure but what someone ought to go with him," said his mother. "Are you *sure* he'll be all right?" she said to her husband.

"Who, Joe?" said Mr. Wilson. "He'll be fine, won't you, son?"

"Sure," said Joseph.

"A boy nine years old ought to be able to travel by himself," said Mr. Wilson, in the patient tone of one who has been saying these same words over and over for several days.

Mrs. Wilson looked up at the train, as one who estimates the probable strength of an enemy. "But suppose something should *happen?*" she asked.

"Look, Helen," her husband said, "the train's going to leave in about four minutes. His bag is already on the train, Helen. It's on the seat where he's going to be sitting from now until he gets to Perryton. I have spoken to the porter and I have given the porter a couple of dollars, and the porter has promised to keep an eye on him and see that he gets off the train with his bag when the train stops at Perryton. He is nine years old, Helen, and he knows his name

© 1952 by Shirley Jackson; originally titled "Journey with a Lady"

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and where he's going and where he's supposed to get off, and Grandpop is going to meet him and will telephone you the minute they get to Grandpop's house, and the porter—"

"I know," said Mrs. Wilson, "but are you sure he'll be all *right?*"

Mr. Wilson and Joseph looked at one another briefly and then away.

Mrs. Wilson took advantage of Joseph's momentary lapse of awareness to put her arm around his shoulders and kiss him again, although he managed to move almost in time and her kiss landed somewhere on the top of his head. *"Mother,"* Joseph said ominously.

"Don't want anything to happen to my little boy," Mrs. Wilson said, with a brave smile.

"Mother, for heaven's *sake,"* said Joseph. "I better get on the train," he said to his father.

"Good idea," said his father.

"'By, Mother," Joseph said, backing toward the train door; he took a swift look up and down the platform, and then reached up to his mother and gave her a rapid kiss on the cheek. "Take care of yourself," he said.

"Don't forget to telephone the minute you get there," his mother said. "Write me every day, and tell Grandma you're supposed to brush your teeth every night and if the weather turns cool—"

"Sure," Joseph said. "Sure, Mother."

"So long, son," said his father.

"So long, Dad," Joseph said; solemnly they shook hands. "Take care of yourself," Joseph said.

"Have a good time," his father said.

As Joseph climbed up the steps to the train he could hear his mother saying, "And telephone us when you get there and be careful—"

"Goodbye, goodbye," he said, and went into the train. He had been located by his father in a double seat at the end of the car and, once settled, he turned as a matter of duty to the window. His father, with an unmanly look of concern, waved to him and nodded violently, as though to indicate that everything was going to be all right, that they had pulled it off beautifully, but his mother, twisting her fingers nervously, came close to the window of the train, and, fortunately unheard by the people within, but probably clearly audible to everyone for miles without, gave him at what appeared to be some length an account of how she had changed her mind and was probably going to come with him after all. Joseph nodded and smiled and waved and shrugged to indicate that he could not hear, but his mother went on talking, now and then glancing nervously at the front of the train, as though afraid that the engine might start and take Joseph away before she had made herself absolutely sure that he was going to be all right. Joseph, who felt with some justice that in the

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past few days his mother had told him every conceivable pertinent fact about his traveling alone to his grandfather's and her worries about same, was able to make out such statements as, "Be careful," and, "Telephone us the minute you get there," and, "Don't forget to write."

Then the train stirred, and hesitated, and moved slightly again, and Joseph backed away from the window, still waving and smiling. He was positive that what his mother was saying as the train pulled out was, "Are you *sure* you'll be all right?" She blew a kiss to him as the train started, and he ducked.

Surveying his prospects as the train took him slowly away from his mother and father, he was pleased. The journey should take only a little over three hours, and he knew the name of the station and had his ticket safely in his jacket pocket; although he had been reluctant to yield in any fashion to his mother's misgivings, he had checked several times, secretly, to make sure the ticket was safe. He had half a dozen comic books —a luxury he was not ordinarily allowed—and a chocolate bar; he had his suitcase and his cap, and he had seen personally to the packing of his first baseman's mitt. He had a dollar bill in the pocket of his pants, because his mother thought he should have some money in case—possibilities which had concretely occurred to her—of a train wreck (although his father had pointed out that in the case of a major disaster the victims were not expected to pay their own expenses, at least not before their families had been notified) or perhaps in the case of some vital expense to which his grandfather's income would not be adequate. His father had thought that Joe ought to have a little money by him in case he wanted to buy anything, and because a man ought not to travel unless he had money in his pocket. "Might pick up a girl on the train and want to buy her lunch," his father had said jovially and his mother, regarding her husband thoughtfully, had remarked, "Let's hope *Joseph* doesn't do things like that," and Joe and his father had winked at one another. So, regarding his comic books and his suitcase and his ticket and his chocolate bar, and feeling the imperceptible but emphatic presence of the dollar bill in his pocket, Joe leaned back against the soft seat, looked briefly out the window at the houses now moving steadily past, and said to himself, "This is the life, boy."

Before indulging in the several glories of comic books and chocolate bar he spent a moment or so watching the houses of his home town disappear beyond the train; ahead of him, at his grandfather's farm, lay a summer of cows and horses and probable wrestling

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matches in the grass; behind him lay school and its infinite irritations, and his mother and father. He wondered briefly if his mother were still looking after the train and telling him to write, and then largely he forgot her.

With a sigh of pure pleasure he leaned back and selected a comic book, one which dealt with the completely realistic adventures of a powerful magician among hostile African tribes. This *is* the life, boy, he told himself again, and glanced again out the window to see a boy about his own age sitting on a fence watching the train go by. For a minute Joseph thought of waving down to the boy, but decided that it was beneath his dignity as a traveler; moreover, the boy on the fence was wearing a dirty sweatshirt which made Joe move uneasily under his stiff collar and suit jacket, and he thought longingly of the comfortable old shirt with the insignia *Brooklyn Dodgers* which was in his suitcase. Then, just as the traitorous idea of changing on the train occurred to him, and of arriving at his grandfather's not in his good suit became a possibility, all sensible thought was driven from his mind by a cruel and unnecessary blow. Someone sat down next to him, breathing heavily, and from the quick flash of perfume and the movement of cloth which could only be a dress rustling, Joe realized with a strong sense of injustice that his paradise had been invaded by some woman.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked.

Joe refused to recognize her existence by turning his head to look at her, but he told her sullenly, "No, it's not." Not taken, he was thinking, what did she think *I* was sitting here for? Aren't there enough old seats in the train she could go and sit in without taking mine?

He seemed to lose himself in contemplation of the scenery beyond the train window, but secretly he was wishing direly that the woman would suddenly discover she had forgotten her suitcase or find out she had no ticket or remember that she had left the bathtub running at home—anything, to get her off the train at the first station, and out of Joe's way.

"You going far?"

Talking, too, Joe thought; she has to take my seat and then she goes and talks my ear off, darn old pest. "Yeah," he said. "Perryton."

"What's your name?"

Joe, from long experience, could have answered all her questions in one sentence, he was so familiar with the series—I'm nine years old, I'm in the fifth grade, and, no, I don't like school, and if you want to know what I learn in school it's nothing because I don't like school and I do like movies, and I'm going to my grandfather's house,

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and more than anything else I hate women who come and sit beside me and ask me silly questions and if my mother didn't keep after me all the time about my manners I would probably gather my things together and move to another seat and if you don't stop asking me—

"What's your name, little boy?"

Little boy, Joe told himself bitterly; on top of everything else, little boy.

"Joe," he said.

"How old are you?"

He lifted his eyes wearily and regarded the conductor entering the car; it was surely too much to hope that this female plague had forgotten her ticket, but could it be remotely possible that she was on the wrong train?

"Got your ticket, Joe?" the woman asked.

"Sure," said Joe. "Have you?"

She laughed and said—apparently addressing the conductor, since her voice was not at this moment the voice women use in addressing a little boy, but the voice which goes with speaking to conductors and taxi drivers and sales clerks, "I'm afraid I haven't got a ticket, I had no time to get one."

"Where you going?" said the conductor.

Would they put her off the train? For the first time Joe turned and looked at her, eagerly and with hope. Would they possibly, hopefully, desperately, put her off the train? "I'm going to Perryton," she said, and Joe's convictions about the generally weak-minded attitudes of the adult world were all confirmed; the conductor tore a slip from a pad he carried, punched a hole in it, and told the woman, "Two seventy-three." While she was searching her pocketbook for her money—if she knew she was going to have to buy a ticket, Joe thought disgustedly, whyn't she have her money ready?—the conductor took Joe's ticket and grinned at him. "Your boy got *his* ticket all right," he pointed out.

The woman smiled. "He got to the station ahead of me," she said.

The conductor gave her her change, and went on down the car. "That was funny, when he thought you were my little boy," the woman said.

"Yeah," said Joe.

"What're you reading?"

Wearily Joe put his comic book down.

"Comic," he said.

"Interesting?"

"Yeah," said Joe.

"Say, look at the policeman," the woman said.

Joe looked where she was pointing and saw—he would not have believed this, since he knew perfectly well that most women cannot tell the difference between a policeman and a mailman—that it was undeniably a policeman, and that he was regarding the occupants of the car very much as

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though there might be a murderer or an international jewel thief riding calmly along on the train. Then, after surveying the car for a moment, he came a few steps forward to the last seat, where Joe and the woman were sitting.

"Name?" he said sternly to the woman.

"Mrs. John Aldridge, officer, said the woman promptly. "And this is my little boy Joseph."

"Hi, Joe," said the policeman.

Joe, speechless, stared at the policeman and nodded dumbly.

"Where'd you get on?" the policeman asked the woman.

"Ashville," she said.

"See anything of a woman about your height and build, wearing a fur jacket, getting on the train at Ashville?"

"I don't think so," said the woman. "Why?"

"Wanted," said the policeman tersely.

"Keep your eyes open," he told Joe. "Might get a reward."

He passed on down the car and stopped occasionally to speak to women who seemed to be alone. Then the door at the far end of the car closed behind him and Joe turned and took a deep look at the woman sitting beside him. "What'd you do?" he asked.

"Stole some money," said the woman, and grinned.

Joe grinned back. If he had been sorely pressed, he might in all his experience until now have been able to identify only his mother as a woman both pretty and lovable; in this case, however—and perhaps it was enhanced by a sort of outlaw glory—he found the woman sitting next to him much more attractive than he had before supposed. She looked nice, she had soft hair, she had a pleasant smile and not a lot of lipstick and stuff on, and her fur jacket was rich and soft against Joe's hand. Moreover, Joe knew absolutely when she grinned at him that there were not going to be any more questions about nonsense like people's ages and whether they liked school, and he found himself grinning back at her in quite a friendly manner.

"They gonna catch you?" he asked.

"Sure," said the woman. "Pretty soon now. But it was worth it."

"Why?" Joe asked; crime, he well knew, did not pay.

"See," said the woman, "I wanted to spend about two weeks having a good time there in Ashville. I wanted this coat, see? And I wanted just to buy a lot of clothes and things."

"So?" said Joe.

"So I took the money from the old tightwad I worked for and I went off to Ashville and bought some clothes and went to a lot of movies and things and had a fine time."

"Sort of a vacation," Joe said.

"Sure," the woman said. "Knew

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all the time they'd catch me, of course. For one thing, I always knew I had to come home again. But it was worth it!"

"How much?" said Joe.

"Two thousand dollars," said the woman.

"Boy!" said Joe.

They settled back comfortably. Joe, without more than a moment's pause to think, offered the woman his comic book about the African head-hunters, and when the policeman came back through the car, eyeing them sharply, they were leaning back shoulder to shoulder, the woman apparently deep in African adventure, Joe engrossed in the adventures of a flying newspaper reporter who solved vicious gang murders.

"How is your book, Ma?" Joe said loudly as the policeman passed, and the woman laughed and said, "Fine, fine."

As the door closed behind the policeman the woman said softly, "You know, I like to see how long I can keep out of their way."

"Can't keep it up forever," Joe pointed out.

"No," said the woman, "But I'd like to go back by myself and just give them what's left of the money. I had my good time."

"Seems to me," Joe said, "that if it's the first time you did anything like this they probably wouldn't punish you so much."

"I'm not ever going to do it again," the woman said. "I mean, you sort of build up all your life for one real good time like this, and then you can take your punishment and not mind it so much."

"I don't know," Joe said reluctantly, various small sins of his own with regard to matches and his father's cigarettes and other people's lunch boxes crossing his mind; "seems to me that even if you do think *now* that you'll never do it again, sometimes—well, sometimes, you do it anyway." He thought. "I always *say* I'll never do it again, though."

"Well, if you do it again," the woman pointed out, "you get punished twice as bad the next time."

Joe grinned. "I took a dime out of my mother's pocketbook once," he said. "But I'll never do that again."

"Same thing I did," said the woman.

Joe shook his head. "If the policemen plan to spank you the way my father spanked me . . ." he said.

They were companionably silent for a while, and then the woman said, "Say, Joe, you hungry? Let's go into the dining car."

"I'm supposed to stay here," Joe said.

"But I can't go without you," the woman said. "They think I'm all right because the woman they want wouldn't be traveling with her little boy."

"Stop calling me your little boy," Joe said.

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"Why?"

"Call me your son or something," Joe said. "No more little boy stuff."

"Right," said the woman. "Anyway, I'm sure your mother wouldn't mind if you went into the dining car with *me*."

"I bet," Joe said, but he got up and followed the woman out of the car and down through the next car; people glanced up at them as they passed and then away again, and Joe thought triumphantly that they would sure stare harder if they knew that this innocent-looking woman and her son were outsmarting the cops every step they took.

They found a table in the dining car, and sat down. The woman took up the menu and said, "What'll you have, Joe?"

Blissfully, Joe regarded the woman, the waiters moving quickly back and forth, the shining silverware, the white tablecloth and napkins. "Hard to say."

"Hamburger?" said the woman. "Spaghetti? Or would you rather just have two or three desserts?"

Joe stared. "You mean, like, just blueberry pie with ice cream and a hot fudge sundae?" he asked. "Like that?"

"Sure," said the woman. "Might as well celebrate one last time."

"When I took that dime out of my mother's pocketbook," Joe told her, "I spent a nickel on gum and a nickel on candy."

"Tell me," said the woman, leaning forward earnestly, "the candy and gum—was it all right? I mean, the same as usual?"

Joe shook his head. "I was so afraid someone would see me," he said, "I ate all the candy in two mouthfuls standing on the street and I was scared to open the gum at all."

The woman nodded. "That's why I'm going back so soon, I guess," she said, and sighed.

"Well," said Joe practically, "might as well have blueberry pie first, anyway."

They ate their lunch peacefully, discussing baseball and television and what Joe wanted to be when he grew up; once the policeman passed through the car and nodded to them cheerfully, and the waiter opened his eyes wide and laughed when Joe decided to polish off his lunch with a piece of watermelon. When they had finished and the woman had paid the check, they found that they were due in Perryton in fifteen minutes, and they hurried back to their seat to gather together Joe's belongings.

"Thank you very much for the nice lunch," Joe said to the woman as they sat down again, and congratulated himself upon remembering to say it.

"Nothing at all," the woman said. "Aren't you my little boy?"

"Watch that little boy stuff," Joe said warningly, and she said, "I mean, aren't you my son?"

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The porter who had been delegated to keep an eye on Joe opened the car door and put his head in. He smiled reassuringly at Joe and said, "Five minutes to your station, boy."

"Thanks," said Joe. He turned to the woman. "Maybe," he said urgently, "if you tell them you're *really* sorry—"

"Wouldn't do at all," said the woman. "I really had a fine time."

"I guess so," Joe said. "But you won't do it again."

"Well, I knew when I started I'd be punished sooner or later," the woman said.

"Yeah," Joe said. "Can't get out of it now."

The train pulled slowly to a stop and Joe leaned toward the window to see if his grandfather were waiting.

"We better not get off together," the woman said; "might worry your grandpa to see you with a stranger."

"Guess so," said Joe. He stood up, and took hold of his suitcase. "Goodbye, then," he said reluctantly.

"Goodbye, Joe," said the woman. "Thanks."

"Right," said Joe, and as the train stopped he opened the door and went out onto the steps. The porter helped him to get down with his suitcase and Joe turned to see his grandfather coming down the platform.

"Hello, fellow," said his grandfather. "So you made it."

"Sure," said Joe. "No trick at all."

"Never thought you wouldn't," said his grandfather. "Your mother wants you to—"

"Telephone as soon as I get here," Joe said. "I know."

"Come along, then," his grandfather said. "Grandma's waiting at home."

He led Joe to the parking lot and helped him and his suitcase into the car. As his grandfather got into the front seat beside him, Joe turned and looked back at the train and saw the woman walking down the platform with the policeman holding her arm. Joe leaned out of the car and waved violently. "So long," he called.

"So long, Joe," the woman called back, waving.

"It's a shame the cops had to get her after all," Joe remarked to his grandfather.

His grandfather laughed. "You read too many comic books, fellow," he said. "Everyone with a policeman isn't being arrested—he's probably her brother or something."

"Yeah," said Joe.

"Have a good trip?" his grandfather asked. "Anything interesting happen?"

Joe thought. "Saw a boy sitting on a fence," he said. "I didn't wave to him, though."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CORNELL WOOLRICH**
TITLE:	***Hurting Much?***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Rodge, a newspaperman
LOCALE:	New York City
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*The detective in this story disproves an old and accepted "truth"—that no man is a hero to his dentist . . . and disproves it the hard way. A Woolrich thriller.*

THERE WAS ANOTHER PATIENT ahead of me in the waiting room. He was sitting there quietly, humbly, with all the terrible resignation of the very poor. He wasn't all jittery and alert the way I was, but just sat there ready to take anything that came, head bowed a little as though he had found life just a succession of hard knocks. His gaze met mine and I suppose he could tell how uncomfortable I was by the look on my face but instead of grinning about it or cracking wise he put himself out to encourage me, cheer me up. When I thought of this afterward it did something to me.

"He not hurt you," he murmured across to me confidentially. "Odder dantist say he very good, you no feel notting at all when he drill."

I showed my gratitude by offering him a cigarette. Misery loves company.

With that, Steve Standish came in from the back, buttoning his white jacket. The moment he saw me, professional etiquette was thrown to the winds. "Well, well, Rodge, so it's finally come to this, has it? I knew I'd get you sooner or later!"

I gave a weak grin and tried to act nonchalant. Finally he said in oh, the most casual manner, "Come on in, Rodge, and let's have a look."

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I suddenly discovered myself to be far more considerate of others than I had hitherto suspected. "This—er—this man was here ahead of me, Steve." Anything to gain five minutes' time.

He glanced at his other patient, carelessly but by no means unkindly or disdainfully. "Yes, but you've got to get down to your office—he probably has the day off. You in a hurry?" he asked.

"Thass all right, I no mine, I got no work," the man answered affably.

"No, Steve, I insist," I said.

"Okay, if that's the way you feel about it," he answered genially. "Be right with you." And he ushered the other patient inside ahead of him. I saw him wink at the man, but at the moment I didn't much care what he thought of my courage. No man is a hero to his dentist.

And not long afterward I was to wonder if that little attack of "cold feet" hadn't been the luckiest thing that ever happened to me.

Steve closed his office door after him, but the partition between the two rooms had evidently been put in long after everything else in the place. It was paper-thin and only reached three-quarters of the way up; every sound that came from the other side was perfectly audible to me where I sat, fidgeting and straining my ears for indications of anguish. But first of all there was a little matter of routine to be gone through. "I guess I'll have to take your name and pedigree myself," Steve's voice boomed out jovially. "It's my assistant's day off."

"Amato Saltone, plizz."

"And where do you live, Amato?" Steve had a way with these people. Not patronizing, just forthright and friendly.

"Two twanny Thirr Avenue. If you plizz, mista."

There was a slight pause. I pictured Steve jotting down the information on a card and filing it away. Then he got down to business. "Now what seems to be the trouble?"

The man had evidently adjusted himself in the chair, meanwhile. Presumably he simply held his mouth open and let Steve find out for himself, because it was again Steve who spoke: "This one?" I visualized him plying his mirror and maybe playing around with one of those sharp little things that look like crochet hooks. All at once his voice had become impatient, indignant even. "What do you call that thing you've got in there? I never saw a filling like it in my life. Looks like the Boulder Dam! Who put it in for you—some bricklayer?"

"Docata Jones, Feefatty-nine Stree'," the man said.

"Never heard of him. He send you here to me?" Steve asked sharply. "You'd think he'd have decency enough to clean up his

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own messes! I suppose there wasn't enough in it for him. Well, that headstone you've got in there has to come out first of all, and you just pay me whatever you can afford as we go along. I'd be ashamed to let a man walk out of my office with a botched-up job like that in his mouth!"

The next thing that came to my ears was the faint whirring of the electric drill, sounding not much louder than if there had been a fly buzzing around the room over my head.

I heard Steve speak just once more, and what he said was that immemorial question of the dentist, "Hurting much?" The man groaned in answer, but it was a most peculiar groan. Even at the instant of hearing it, it struck me there was something different about it. It sounded so hollow and far away, as though it had come from the very depths of his being, and broke off so suddenly at the end.

He didn't make another sound after that. But whatever it was, it had taken more than a mere twinge of pain to make him groan like that. Or was it just my own overwrought nerves that made me imagine it?

An instant later I knew I had been right. Steve's voice told me that something out of the ordinary had happened. "Here, hold your head up so I can get at you," he said. At first jokingly, and then —"Here! What's the matter with you?" Alarm crept in. "Wake up, will you? Wake up!" Alarm turned into panic. "Rodge!" he called out to me.

But I was on my feet already and half across the waiting room, my own trivial fears a thing of the past. He threw the door open before I got to it and looked out at me. His face was white. "This fellow—something's happened to him, he's turning cold here in the chair and I can't bring him to!"

I brushed past him and bent over the figure hunched in the chair. Horrible to relate, his mouth was still wide open. I touched his forehead; it was already cooler by far than the palm of my hand, and clammy to the touch. I tried to rouse him by shaking him—no good—then felt for his heart. There was no heartbeat any more. Steve was on the other side of him, holding his dental mirror before the open mouth. We both watched it fascinatedly; it stayed clear as crystal.

"He's gone," I muttered. "What do you make of it?"

"I'm going to try oxygen," Steve babbled. He was hauling down a big, clumsy-looking cylinder from a shelf with jerky, spasmodic movements that showed how badly shaken he was. "You'd better send in a call for an ambulance—hurry!"

The phone was outside in the waiting room; that didn't take any time at all. When I came back

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there was a mask over the man's face and a tube leading from his mouth to the cylinder. Steve was just standing there helplessly. Every few seconds he'd touch a little wheel-shaped valve on the cylinder, but the indicator showed that it was already as wide open as it could go. "Keep your hand on his heart," he said to me hoarsely.

It was no use. By the time the ambulance doctor and a policeman got there, Steve had taken the tube out and turned off the oxygen.

The ambulance doctor took one look as he came in and then told us what we already knew. "All up, eh?" he said. He then stretched the man out on the floor, with the help of the cop, and began to examine him. I cleared out of the room at this point and sat down to wait outside—fully imagining I was being big-hearted and staying on of my own free will to brace Steve up instead of going somewhere more cheerful. It would all be over in another five or ten minutes, I thought unsuspectingly, and then maybe Steve and I had better go and have a drink together some place.

The patrolman came out to me and asked if I'd been in there when it happened. I told him no, I'd been out here waiting my turn. I was about to add for no particular reason that I was a very good friend of Steve's and not just a stray patient, when things began to happen rapidly.

So far everything had been routine on their part. But now the ambulance doctor finished his examination and came out, kit in hand, Steve trailing after him. What he had to say was to the policeman, not to Steve at all. "It wasn't his heart," he said. "Better phone Headquarters and tell the coroner to come up here. He might want to bring a couple of the boys with him."

"What's up?" Steve tried to sound casual but he wasn't very good at it. The cop was already at the phone.

"Not natural causes at all," the doctor said grimly. He wouldn't say anything more than that. The shrug he gave plainly meant, "It's not my job." I thought he looked at Steve a little peculiarly as he closed the door after him.

The cop became noticeably less friendly after that; he remained standing to one side of the door and had a watchful air about him. Once when Steve made a move to go back into the other room, his upper lip lifted after the manner of a mastiff with a bone and he growled warningly, "Take it easy, fellow."

They didn't take long to get there, the coroner and "a couple of the boys." They looked more like high-powered real estate agents to me, but this was the first time I'd even been in the same room with a detective.

"What's up?" began one of them,

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lingering with us while the coroner and his pal went inside.

Steve told him the little there was to tell; the man had climbed into his chair, Steve had started to drill, and the man had gone out like a light. No, he'd never treated him before, never even laid eyes on him until five minutes before he'd died.

That was all there was to this first session—a harmless little chat, you might call it. The cop went back to his beat, a stretcher arrived, and poor Amato Saltone departed, his troubles at an end. Steve's, though, were just beginning—and possibly mine with them. The second detective came out with the coroner, and the atmosphere, which hadn't been any too cordial, all at once became definitely hostile.

"Cyanide of potassium," snapped the coroner. "Just enough to kill—not a grain more, not a grain less. I pumped his stomach, but the traces were all over the roof of his mouth and the lining of his throat anyway." And he too departed.

The second detective held the inner door open and said, "Come inside, Dr. Standish." It wasn't said as politely as it reads in print.

I've already mentioned that every word spoken could be heard through or over the partition. But I was only allowed to hear the opening broadside—and that was ominous enough. "Where do you keep your cyanide, Dr. Standish?"

As soon as he realized what the acoustics of the place were, the detective who had remained with me immediately suggested, with heavy emphasis, "Let's just step out in the hall."

After we'd been standing out there smoking a while, Steve's office phone rang. My guardian took it upon himself to answer it, making sure that I came with him, so I had a chance to overhear the wind-up of Steve's quizzing. The call itself was simply from a patient, and the detective took pains to inform her that Dr. Standish had canceled all appointments for the rest of the day.

I didn't like the way that sounded; nor did I like the turn the questioning had taken.

"So a man that's going to commit suicide goes to all the trouble of having a cavity filled in his mouth just before he does it, does he?" Steve's interrogator was saying as we came in. "What for—to make himself beautiful for St. Peter?"

Steve was indignant by now. "You've got a nerve trying to tack anything on me! He may have eaten something deadly outside without knowing it and then only got the effects after he was in my chair."

"Not cyanide, pal—it works instantly. And it isn't given away for nothing either. A fellow of that type would have jumped off a subway platform, it's cheaper. Where

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would he have the money or drag to buy cyanide? He probably couldn't even pronounce the name. Now why don't you make it easy for yourself and admit that you had an accident?"

Steve's voice broke. "Because I had nothing to do with it, accidentally or otherwise!"

"So you're willing to have us think you did it purposely, eh? Keenan!" he called out.

We both went in there, Keenan just a step in back of me to guide me.

"There's no trace of where he kept it hidden, but it's all over his drill thick as jam," Keenan's teammate reported. He detached the apparatus from the tripod it swung on, carefully wrapped it in tissue paper, and put it in his pocket.

"I'm going to book you," he said. "Come on, you're coming down to Headquarters with me."

Steve swayed a little, then got a grip on himself. "Am I under arrest?" he faltered.

"Well," remarked the detective sarcastically, "this is no invitation to a Park Avenue ball."

"What about this fellow?" Keenan indicated me. "Bring him along too?"

"He might be able to contribute something," was the reply.

So down to Headquarters we went and I lost sight of Steve as soon as we got there. They kept me waiting around for a while, then questioned me. But I could tell that I wasn't being held as an accessory. I suppose my puffed-out cheek was more in my favor than anything else—although why a man suffering from toothache would be less likely to be an accessory to murder than anyone else I failed to see. They didn't even look to see if it was phony; for all they knew I could have had a wad of cotton stuffed in my mouth.

I told them everything there was to tell, not even omitting to mention the cigarette I had given the man when we were both sitting in the waiting room. It was only after I'd said this that I realized how bad it sounded for me if they cared to look at it that way. The cyanide could just as easily have been concealed in that cigarette. Luckily they'd already picked up and examined the butt (he hadn't had time to smoke more than half of it) and found it to be okay. Who says the innocent don't run as great a risk as the guilty?

I told them all I could about Steve and as soon as I was cleared and told I could go home, I embarked on a lengthy plea in his defense, assuring them they were making the biggest mistake of their lives.

"What motive could he possibly have?" I argued. "Check up on him, you'll find he has a home in Forest Hills, two cars, a walloping practice, goes to all the first nights at the theater! What did that jobless Third Avenue slob have that

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he needed? Why, I heard him with my own ears tell the guy not to be in a hurry about paying the bill! Where's your motive? They came from two different worlds!"

All I got was the remark, Why didn't I join the squad and get paid for my trouble, and the suggestion, Why didn't I go home now?"

One of them, Keenan, who turned out to be a rather likable sort after all, took me aside and explained very patiently as to a ten-year-old child: "There's only three possibilities in this case, see? Suicide, accidental poisoning, and poisoning on purpose. Now your own friend himself is the one that has blocked up the first two, not us. We were willing to give him every chance, in the beginning. But no, he insists the guy didn't once lift his hands from under that linen apron to take the stuff himself—take it out of his pocket and pop it in his mouth, for instance. Standish claims he never even once turned his back on him while he was in the chair, and that the fellow's hands stayed folded in his lap *under* the bib the whole time. Says he noticed that because everyone else always grabs the arms of the chair and hangs on. So that's out.

"And secondly he swears he has never kept any such stuff around the place as cyanide, in any shape or form, so it couldn't have got on the drill by accident. So *that's* out too. What have you got left? Poisoning on purpose—which has a one-word name: *murder*. That's all today—and be sure you don't leave town until after the trial. You'll be needed on the witness stand."

I spent the rest of the night with a wet handkerchief pasted against my cheek, doing some heavy thinking. Every word Steve and the victim had spoken behind the partition passed before me in review. "Where do you live, Amato? Two-twanny Thirr Avenue, mista." I'd start in from there.

I took an interpreter with me, a fellow on my own office staff who knew a little of everything from Eskimo to Greek. I wasn't taking any chances.

There seemed to be dozens of them; they lived in a cold-water flat on the third floor rear. The head of the clan was Amato's rather stout wife. I concentrated on her; when a fellow has a toothache he'll usually tell his wife all about it.

"Ask her where this Doctor Jones lived who sent him to Standish."

She didn't know, Amato hadn't even told her what the dentist's name was. Hadn't they a bill from the man to show me? (I wanted to prove that Amato had been there.) No, no bill, but that didn't matter because Amato couldn't read anyway, and even if he had

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been able to, there was no money to pay it with.

If he couldn't read, I persisted, how had he known where to find a dentist?

She shrugged. Maybe he was going by and saw the dentist at work through a window.

I went through the entire family, from first to last, and got nowhere. Amato had done plenty of howling and calling on the saints in the depths of the night, and even kept some of the younger children quiet at times by letting them look at his bad tooth; but as for telling them where, when, or by whom it had been treated, it never occurred to him.

So I was not only no further but I had even lost a good deal of confidence. "Docata Jones" began to look pretty much like a myth. Steve hadn't known him, either. But the man had said Fifty-ninth Street. With all due respect for the dead, I didn't think Amato had brains enough to make up even that little out of his head. I'd have to try that angle next, and unaided, since Amato's family had turned out to be a bust.

I tackled the phone book first, hoping for a short cut. Plenty of Joneses, D.D.S., but not a single one on Fifty-ninth. Nor even one on Fifty-seventh or Fifty-eighth or Sixtieth, in case Amato was dumb enough not even to know which street he'd been on. The good old-fashioned way was all that was left.

I swallowed a malted milk, tied a double knot in my shoelaces, and started out on foot, westward from the Queensboro Bridge. I went into every lobby, every hallway, every basement; I scanned every sign in every window, every card in every mail box. I consulted every superintendent in every walk-up, every starter in every building with an elevator, every landlady in every rooming house.

I followed the street west until it became fashionable Central Park South, then farther still as it turned into darkest San Juan Hill, giving a lot of attention to the Vanderbilt Clinic on Tenth Avenue, and finally came smack up against the speedway bordering the Hudson, with my feet burning me like blazes. No results. No Dr. Jones. It took me all the first day and most of the second. At 2 P.M. Thursday I was back again at the Bridge.

I got out and stood on the corner smoking a cigarette. I'd used the wrong method, that was all. I'd been rational about it, Amato had been instinctive. What had his wife said? He was going by and most likely saw some dentist working behind a window and that decided him. I'd been looking for a dentist, he hadn't—until he happened on one. I'd have to put myself in his place to get the right step.

I walked back two blocks to Third Avenue and started out

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afresh. Amato had lived on Third Avenue, so he had probably walked all the way up it looking for work until he got to Fifty-ninth, and then turned either east or west. West there was a department store on one side, a five-and-ten and a furniture store on the other; they wouldn't interest him. East there was a whole line of mangy little shops and stalls; I turned east. I trudged along; I was Amato now, worrying about where my next dollar was coming from, not thinking about my tooth at all—at least, not just at that moment.

A shadow fell before me on the sidewalk. I looked up. A huge, swaying, papier-maché gold tooth was hanging out over the doorway. It was the size of a football at least. Even Amato would have known what it was there for. Maybe he'd got a bad twinge just then. The only trouble was—I'd seen it myself yesterday, it was almost the first thing that had caught my eye when I started out. I'd investigated, you may be sure. And the card on the window said *Dr. Carter*, as big as life. That was out—or was it? Amato couldn't read; "Carter" wouldn't mean any more to him than "Jones." But then where had he got "Jones" from? Familiar as it is, it would have been as foreign to him as his own name was to me.

No use going any farther, though. If that gold tooth hadn't made up Amato's mind for him, nothing else the whole length of the street could have. I was on the point of going in, for a quick once-over, but a hurried glance at my own appearance decided me not to. Serge business suit, good hat, dusty but well-heeled shoes. Whatever had happened to Amato, if he *had* gone in there, wasn't likely to happen to anyone dressed the way I was. If I was going to put myself in his place, I ought to try to look like him. And there were a few other things, too, still out of focus.

I jumped in a cab and chased down to Headquarters. I didn't think they'd let me see Steve, but somehow I managed to wangle it. I suppose Keenan had a hand in it. And then too, Steve hadn't cracked yet; that may have had something to do with it.

"What enemies have you?" I shot out. There wasn't much time.

"None," he said. "I never harmed anyone in my life."

"Think hard," I begged. "You've got to help me. Maybe 'way back, maybe some little thing."

"Nope," he insisted, "my life's been a bed of roses until the day before yesterday."

"Let's skip that and look at it the other way around. Who are your friends—outside of myself?"

He ran over a list of names as long as a timetable. He left out one, though. "And Dave Carter?" I supplied. "Know him?"

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He nodded cheerfully. "Sure, but how did you know? We used to be pretty chummy. I haven't seen him in years, though—we drifted apart. We started out together, both working in the same office I have now. Then he moved out on me—thought he could do better by himself, I guess."

"And did he?"

"He hit the skids. All the patients kept on coming to me, for some reason, and he just sat there in his spic-and-span office twiddling his thumbs. Inside of six months the overhead was too much for him and here's the payoff: he ended up by having to move into a place ten times worse than the one he'd shared with me. What with one thing and another, I lent him quite a bit of money which I never got back."

"Did he turn sour on you?"

"Not at all. Last time I saw him he slapped me on the back and said, 'More power to you, Stevie, you're a better man than I am!'"

"In your hat!" I thought skeptically. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Years back. As a matter of fact, I clean forgot him until you—"

I stood up to go without waiting for him to finish. "Excuse the rush, but I've got things to do."

"Dig me up a good lawyer, will you?" he called after me. "Price no object."

"You don't need a lawyer," I shouted back. "All you need is a little dash of suspicion in your nature. Like me."

I got Keenan to take me in and introduce me to the chief. The chief was regular, but a tough nut to crack. Still he must have been in good humor that day. If he reads this, no offense meant, but the cigars he smokes are awful. I had a proposition to make to him, and two requests. One of them he gave in to almost at once—loving newspapermen the way he did. The other he said he'd think over. As for the proposition itself, he said it wasn't so hot, but to go ahead and try it if I felt like it, only not to blame anyone but myself if I got into trouble.

From Headquarters I went straight to a pawnshop on Third Avenue. It was long after dark, but they stay open until nine. I bought a suit of clothes for six bucks. The first one the man showed me I handed back to him. "That's the best I can give you—" he started in.

"I don't want the best, I want the worst," I said, much to his surprise. I got it all right.

From there I went to a second pawnshop and purchased what had once been an overcoat. Price, four-fifty. The coat and suit were both ragged, patched, and faded, but at least the pawnbroker had kept them brushed off; I fixed that with the help of a barrel of ashes I passed a few doors away. I also traded hats with a panhan-

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dler who crossed my path, getting possession of the peculiar shapeless mound he had been wearing on his head.

I trundled all this stuff home and managed to hide it from my wife. In the morning, though, when she saw me arrayed in it from head to foot, she let out a yell and all but sank to the floor. "Now never mind the hysterics," I reproved. "Papa knows just what he's doing!"

"If this has anything to do with Steve, you're a day late," she told me when she was through giggling. "They've dismissed the case against him." She held out the morning paper to me.

I didn't bother looking at it; in the first place, it was one of the two requests I'd made at Headquarters the night before; in the second place, it wasn't true.

Keenan was waiting for me on the southwest corner of Fifty-ninth and Second, as per agreement. Anyone watching us would have thought our behavior odd, to say the least. I went up to him and opened my mouth as if I were Joe E. Brown making faces at him. "It's that tooth up there, that molar on the right side. Take a good look at it." He did. This was for purposes of evidence. "Got the picture?" He nodded. "I'm going in now, where that gold tooth is, halfway down the block. Back in half an hour. Wait here for me and keep your fingers crossed."

This statement wasn't quite accurate, though. I was sure I was going in where the gold tooth was, but I wasn't sure I was coming back in half an hour—I wasn't sure I was coming back at all, any time.

I left him abruptly and went into the office of Dr. David Carter. I was cold and scared. The accent bothered me too. I decided a brogue would be safest. No foreign languages for me. Carter was a short, dumpy little man, as good-natured and harmless-looking as you'd want. Only his eyes gave him away: slits they were, little malevolent pig eyes. The eyes had it; they told me I wasn't wasting my time. The office was a filthy, rundown place. Instead of a partition, the dental chair was right in the room, with a screen around it. There was an odor of stale gas around.

My feet kept begging me to get up and run out of there while I still had the chance. I couldn't, though; Keenan was waiting on the corner. I wanted to keep his respect.

Carter was standing over me; he didn't believe in the daily bath, either. "Well, young fellow?" he said sleekly. I pointed sorrowfully at my cheek, which had been more or less inflated for the past three days. The pain had gone out of it long ago, however. Pain and a swelling rarely go together, contrary to general belief.

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"So I see," he said, but made no move to do anything about it. "What brings you here to me?" he asked craftily.

"Sure 'tis the ellygant gold tooth ye have out, boss," I answered shakily. Did that sound Irish enough? I wondered. Evidently it did.

"Irishman, eh?" he told me, not very cleverly. "What's your name?"

"McConnaughy." I'd purposely picked a tongue-twister, to get the point across I was trying to make.

He bit. "How do you spell it?"

"Sure, I don't know now," I smiled wanly. "I nivver in me life learned to spell." That was the point I was trying to make.

"Can't read or write, eh?" He seemed pleased rather than disappointed. "Didn't you ever go to school when you were a kid?"

"I minded the pigs and such," I croaked forlornly.

He suddenly whipped out a newspaper he'd been holding behind his back and shoved it under my nose. "What d'you think of that?" It was upside down. He was trying to catch me off guard, hoping I'd turn it right side up without thinking and give myself away. I kept my hand off it. "What do it say?" I queried helplessly.

He tossed it aside. "I guess you can't read, at that," he said. But the presence of the newspaper meant that he already knew Steve was back in circulation; the item had been in all of them that morning.

He motioned me to the chair. I climbed into it. I was too curious to see what would happen next to be really frightened. Otherwise how could I have sat in it at all? He took a cursory glance into my mouth—almost an absent-minded glance, as if his thoughts were really elsewhere. "Can you pay me?" he said next, still very absent-minded and not looking at me at all.

"I'll do me best, sorr. I have no job."

"Tell you what I'll do for you," he said suddenly. "I'll give you temporary relief, and then I'll send you to someone who'll finish the job for you. He won't charge you anything, either. You just tell him Doctor Smith sent you."

My heart started to go like a triphammer. So I was on the right track after all, was I? He'd picked a different name this time to cover up his traces, that was all.

He got to work. He pulled open a drawer and I saw a number of fragile clay caps or crowns, hollow inside and thin as tissue paper. They were about the size and shape of thimbles. I could hardly breathe any more. Steve's voice came back to me, indignantly questioning Amato: "Looks like the Boulder Dam . . . some bricklayer put it in for you?"

He took one of these out and closed the drawer. Then he opened

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another drawer and took something else out. But this time I couldn't see what it was, because he carefully stood over it with his back to me. He glanced over his shoulder at me to see if I was watching him. I beat him to it and lowered my eyes to my lap. He closed the second drawer. But I knew which one it was: the lower right in a cabinet of six.

He came over to me. "Open," he commanded. My eyes rolled around in their sockets. I still had time to rear up out of the chair, push him back, and snatch the evidence out of his hand. But I wasn't sure yet whether or not it *was* evidence.

Those caps may have been perfectly legitimate, for all I knew; I was no dentist. So I sat quiet, paralyzed with fear, unable to move.

And the whole thing was over almost before it had begun. He sprayed a little something on the tooth, waxed it with hot grease, and stuck the cap on over it. No drilling, no dredging, no cleansing whatever. "That's all," he said with an evil grin. "But remember, it's only temporary. By tomorrow at the latest you go to this other dentist and he'll finish the job for you."

I saw the point at once. He hadn't cleaned the tooth in the least; in an hour or two it would start aching worse than ever and I'd *have* to go to the other dentist. The same thing must have happened to Amato. I was in for it now! "Don't chew on that side," he warned me, "until you see him." He didn't want it to happen to me at home or at some coffee counter, but in Steve's office, in Steve's chair!

Then he gave me the name and place I was to go to. "Standish, Twenty-eight and Lexington, second floor." Over and over again. "Will you remember that?"

That was all I needed—I had the evidence against him now. But I didn't make a hostile move toward him; instead, I stumbled out into the street and swayed toward the corner where Keenan was waiting for me. Let the cops go after him. I had myself to worry about now. I was carrying Death in my mouth. Any minute, the slightest little jolt—

Keenan had been joined by a second detective. They both came toward me and held me up by the elbows. I managed to get my mouth open and Keenan looked in. "Get the difference?" I gasped.

"It begins to look like you were right," he muttered.

He phoned the chief at Headquarters and then got me into a taxi with him. The second man was left there to keep an eye on Carter and tail him if he left his office.

"What're you holding your mouth open like that for?" he asked me in the cab.

"A sudden jolt of the taxi might

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knock my teeth together," I whispered. I had seen how thin those caps were.

We raced down Lexington and got out at Steve's office. Steve had been rushed up there from the detention pen in a police car, along with the chief himself and two more detectives. He had to have facilities if he was going to save me from what had happened to Amato.

"He's got the evidence," Keenan informed them as I pointed to my mouth. "In there," I gasped, and my knees buckled under me.

Steve got me into the chair. Sweat broke out on his face after he'd taken one look at Carter's work, but he tried to reassure me. "All right, all right now," he said soothingly. "You know I won't let you down."

He looked around at them. The chief had his usual rank cigar in his mouth, which had gone out in the excitement. One of the others held a pipe between his clenched teeth.

"Where's your tobacco pouch?" asked Steve hoarsely. "Let me have it, I'll get you a new one."

The lining was thin rubber. He tore that out, scattering tobacco all over the floor. Then he held it up to the light and stretched it to see if there were any holes. Then, with a tiny pair of curved scissors, he cut a small wedge-shaped hole in it. "Now hold your mouth wide open," he said to me, "and whatever you do, don't move!" He lined the inside of my mouth with the rubber, carefully working the tooth Carter had just treated through the hole he had cut, so that it was inside the rubber. The ends of the rubber lining he left protruding through my lips. I felt as if I were choking. "Can you breathe?" he said. I batted my eyes to show him he could go ahead.

He thrust wedges into my cheeks so that I couldn't close my jaws whether I wanted to or not. Then he came out with a tiny mallet and a little chisel, about the size of a nail. "I may be able to get it out whole," he explained to the chief. "It's been in less than half an hour. Drilling is too risky."

His face, as he bent over me, was white as plaster. I shut my eyes and thought, "Well, here I go —or here I stay!" I felt a number of dull blows on my jawbone. Then suddenly something seemed to crumble and a puff of ice-cold air went way up inside my head. I lay there rigid and—nothing happened.

"Got it!" Steve breathed hotly into my face. He started to work the rubber lining carefully out past my lips and I felt a little sick. When it was clear he passed it over to the detectives without even a look at its contents, and kept his attention focused on me. "Now, watch yourself—don't move yet!" he commanded nervously. He

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took a spray and rinsed out the inside of my mouth, every corner and crevice of it. "Don't swallow," he kept warning me. "Keep from swallowing!" Meanwhile, Keenan, his chief, and the others had their heads together over the spread-out contents of the little rubber lining.

Finally Steve turned off the water and took the pads away from my gums. He sat down with a groan; I sat up with a shudder. "I wouldn't want to live the past five minutes over again for all the rice in China!" he admitted, mopping his brow.

"Packed with cyanide crystals," the chief said. "Go up there and make the pinch. Two counts, murder and attempted murder." Two men started for the door.

"Top drawer left for the caps, bottom drawer right for the cy," I called after them weakly and rather needlessly. They'd find it, all right.

But I was very weary all at once and very much disinterested. I stumbled out of the chair and slouched toward the door, muttering something about going home and resting up. Steve pulled himself together and called me back.

"Don't forget the nerve is still exposed in that tooth of yours. I'll plug it for you right this time." I sat down again, too limp to resist. He attached a new drill to the pulley and started it whirring. As he brought it toward me I couldn't help edging away from it. "Can you beat it?" He turned to Keenan, who had stayed behind, and shook his head in hopeless amazement. "Takes his life in his hands for a friend, but when it comes to a little ordinary drilling he can't face it!"

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THE DRAMATIC DEATHS OF DR. KANG

DEATH IN ITALY

by VICTOR CANNING

DR. KANG PAUSED ON THE LITTLE wooden jetty and taking off his thick-lensed glasses polished them gently. Overhead the Italian sky was a blaze of stars and a faint night mist lay across the face of the wide lake. Stoutish, a warm smile on his Buddha-like face, he nodded to the speedboat which was tied alongside the jetty.

"This is the boat. They said it would be here."

"Then what are we waiting for?" said his companion. "Let's get on with it."

"You are impatient. That is your youth," said Dr. Kang amiably. "In time you will learn that the good things of this life should be approached slowly." And to himself he was thinking that it was hard for an old fox to hunt with a young cub.

"Well, I hope it is going to be a good thing. I don't trust Boldini."

"It is wise to trust no one."

Dr. Kang, hugging a wide, flattish parcel under his arm, climbed down into the boat. His companion cast off and started the engine. Alisio, young and tall, with a long, intellectual face, was a bundle of nerves. It was a handicap, Dr. Kang felt, in a man of so much talent. An intelligent thief should be without nerves. Dr. Kang had no nerves, only a fine instinct for a fat profit and a philosophical indifference to his occasional setbacks.

As the speedboat sped across the lake to the island residence of Count Boldini, one of the wealthiest men in Italy, Dr. Kang pulled out a revolver and handed it to Alisio.

"He who sups with the devil should use a long spoon. While I do the talking you will watch. Once the bargain is made he may decide that he has no further use for us."

"Let him try!" snapped Alisio. "I put three months' planning and hard work into this. It needs brains to steal pictures from the Pitti Palazzo."

"And experience to find a market for them. That is why we are so suited to each other."

Ten minutes later the speedboat drew up to the concrete landing-stage of a rocky, pine-clad island. Without a word a boatman appeared from the night shadows and made them fast alongside another boat. As they stepped out he pointed to the path leading to the house. They went up a terraced slope, the air rich with the smell of flowers and pines. At the top of the slope was a small summer villa. There was a light in one of the ground-floor rooms.

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As they crossed the paved forecourt, the French windows opened and a man came out.

"Dr. Kang?"

"Yes."

"The Count is waiting for you. I am his secretary."

He stood aside to let them enter, but Alisio said sharply, "You first. I do not like people behind my back when I do business."

Dr. Kang smiled. "You will forgive Alisio," he said gently as they entered the room. "It is his first experience with this kind of business."

"He needs also to learn how to carry a revolver less conspicuously," said a voice. "It is bulging out his jacket pocket like a wine flask."

Dr. Kang bowed to the figure behind the desk. "Given time he will learn. But a man who shows himself armed is seldom attacked."

Count Boldini was a large, red-faced man with a soft thatch of tawny hair. He looked jovial, comfortable and easy-going—like an old lion, thought Dr. Kang, that has just finished a good meal. The Count nodded to his secretary, "Come on then, let's see them."

Dr. Kang handed his parcel to the secretary, who unwrapped it to reveal two small canvases in their original frames. He set them up on a small side table and Count Boldini came over and stood before them.

"Beautiful," he said, "but they both need cleaning. Especially the Titian." He turned away abruptly and went back to his desk. He sat there with his chin resting on his hands as he eyed Dr. Kang.

"Your price is high, Kang."

"Undoubtedly," agreed Dr. Kang placidly. "But there are at least three other private collectors who would buy them."

"And if I buy them—what is to stop you from blackmailing me for the rest of your life?"

"It is a problem you have faced before. How long would be the rest of my life? I have no wish for a knife in my back some dark night. Our price is high because it includes our silence, and silence is golden . . ."

Count Boldini chuckled.

"The pictures might be traced to me."

Dr. Kang shook his head. "Alisio may be young, but he is no fool. The Italian police have no idea how they were stolen. Nor have I. When we leave here, we separate."

"Give us our money and let us go," said Alisio. "Nobody can trace anything." His hand tightened nervously around the revolver in his pocket.

"The young eagle is clumsy at its first kill," apologized Dr. Kang. "You will forgive Alisio his impatience."

"A man who brings me a Titian and a Veronese can be forgiven anything," said the Count and he nodded to his secretary. "Get the money."

The secretary crossed the room to a safe in the wall and worked the

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combination lock. He opened it and brought out a paper parcel which he carried across to the desk. Dr. Kang took it and unwrapped it. Alisio leaned over his shoulder, watching.

"Now this," the young man said, "is more beautiful than any painting."

When Dr. Kang had counted the banknotes, Count Boldini said, "It is all there? Good. You will take the boat back and leave it at the jetty where you found it."

A few moments later they were on their way down to the landing-stage. The boatman was waiting for them and held the speedboat as they went aboard. Alisio dropped the parcel of banknotes onto the seat in the stern and started the engine. His nervousness was now gone and he whistled gently. The boat swept out into the misty night.

After a while Alisio said, "Well, that was easy. They didn't try a thing." Then, throttling the engine down, so that the boat barely crept along, he turned to Dr. Kang and went on, "But none of it could have happened without me. For everyone else it was too easy. Boldini has more money than he knows what to do with. And you—you just made a few simple arrangements. I did the real work. I did the planning and took the risks." He drew himself up and his face was suddenly hard.

"You are trying to say something, Alisio?"

"Sure. I'm saying that I'm the one who really earned the cash. And I mean to have it all."

As he spoke he whipped out the revolver Dr. Kang had given him. Dr. Kang started to move but he was not quick enough. Alisio, with the revolver less than two feet from Dr. Kang's body, fired twice quickly. Dr. Kang's heavy body reeled backward and hit the side of the boat. The impetus sent his body overboard. There was a great splash and the boat rocked violently.

Alisio bent forward, opened the throttle, and the speedboat roared away to the far shore. As he held the wheel his long face was flushed with a triumphant smile.

He died with the smile of triumph still on his face. Thirty seconds after the shooting of Dr. Kang there was a tremendous explosion from under the engine casing of the speedboat. A great orange flame spouted skyward over the dark waters and a mass of wreckage was flung into the air.

In the water, close to the island, Dr. Kang heard and saw the explosion, and he didn't need to be told why it had happened. Men like Boldini weren't anxious for any record of their transactions to exist. And how easy it would be for Boldini to explain the accident. Two unknown men had stolen his speedboat, a petrol leakage, and then sudden tragedy . . . And, if he knew Boldini, it would not be long before the man was on his way to the accident to

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make sure that—by a miracle—neither of them still lived. The Count had to be sure.

Dr. Kang began to swim quietly back to the island. He was shaken, but his keen mind was working unimpaired. Because Alisio had been so nervous, so uncertain, he had loaded the revolver with blanks to avoid hasty accidents, but a couple of blanks fired a few feet from one's chest were still quite unpleasant.

As he neared the island, Dr. Kang heard the roar of another boat through the mist. Twenty yards from him he saw a headlight snap on. Reflected in its glow three figures were grouped behind the wheel—Boldini, the secretary, the boatman.

Dr. Kang swam ashore by the landing-stage, squeezed most of the water from his clothing, and then made his way up to the villa. Honey, he told himself, was best taken when the bees were away from the hive.

The French windows were open and the empty study was blazing with light. He went in and, collecting the two pictures, carefully wrapped them. There were other customers . . . and the next time he would work alone. The pictures wrapped, he went over to the safe. He had watched the secretary carefully as he had worked the combination. It wouldn't be the first time that his quick eyes had followed a safe combination.

He was lucky—the safe swung open at the second attempt. The contents were a rich return for Alisio's treachery and the discomforts of a swim in the lake. Ten minutes later he was hiding in the shadows of the landing-stage. The second speedboat came back and the three men moved up to the villa.

Dr. Kang gave them a few minutes grace and then got into the boat and started the engine. As he moved away he thought he heard someone shouting angrily in the villa.

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THE WOMEN IN HIS LIFE

by WHIT MASTERSON

(continued from page 19)

ALEXIS LOOKED FRANTICALLY FOR some salvation and found it at her feet. It was only an empty beer bottle but she seized it eagerly. Holding it like a club, she rose from behind the barrel and ran to meet her enemy. He put out an arm to halt her and, at that instant, she swung.

The bottle thudded hard against the side of his head, driving him to his knees. Sobbing, Alexis scrambled past her fallen foe, lunging for the comparative safety of the street. She didn't reach it. A hand seized her arm, spinning her around, thrusting her against the wall of the alley. She opened her mouth to scream but her captor shook her roughly, driving her breath away.

"Stop it!" his voice commanded in her ear. "What the hell are you doing, anyway? Stop fighting for a minute and take a look at this."

Alexis felt that she was going to faint. In a desperate effort to keep her senses she focused on what the man held before her eyes. It was a wallet, open. Fastened to it was a badge, a gold shield that bore the inscription *New York State Police*. The relief was so sudden that her legs gave way and she fell against his chest.

Alexis lived the next five minutes in a daze. It wasn't until they were seated at a little waterfront lunch counter, sipping black coffee, that she could speak coherently. Then she murmured, "I feel so darn foolish."

"I'm the one who feels foolish," he said. His name, she had learned, was Andrew Stock—Lieutenant Stock. "Letting myself get clobbered that way."

"Does it still hurt?" she asked contritely.

Stock took his handkerchief away from his temple and inspected it wryly. "The bleeding's stopped. I guess I'll have a good-sized bump for a while. You swing a mean beer bottle."

"I'm awfully sorry. But I thought you were—well, I'm not sure what I thought." She looked at him curiously. "Why were you following me? And what are you doing out here in California, anyway?"

"It's a free country," Stock said blandly. Then he grinned and Alexis thought that his face, once it relaxed its grim expression, was almost handsome. "But I guess the answer's obvious. I'm here for the same reason you are—to check into your father's death."

"You mean the police have finally figured out it wasn't suicide?"

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"Don't sound so patronizing, please. As far as we're concerned, it still is suicide. But you women kicked up such a fuss that we decided we'd better check it out."

"And does your assignment include following me?"

"Well, if it was murder, you'd be a suspect," Stock told her calmly. Alexis gasped. "So would your two friends. But I followed you because I was curious what you were up to. You see, we came out here on the same plane. I had a seat in the rear where I could watch you, and you looked pretty keyed-up. Then the hotel clerk told me how you insisted on having the same room as your father—"

"So that's why he acted so peculiar!" Alexis cried. "He must think I'm a criminal or something."

"Well, I just figured I'd trail along and see if you came up with anything. Now the question is—did you?" Stock listened intently as Alexis told him what she had discovered about the missing John Lamarr. "You should have got the guest list, anyway," he commented when she finished. "But I can probably do it easier. Through with your coffee?"

"What are we going to do now?"

"Call a cab and run you back to the hotel. You'll need to freshen up a bit before I take you out to dinner."

"Oh? And when did we make that date?"

"Just now. I think you've got into enough trouble for one day. This is a man's job, anyhow. You ought to know that by now."

"I think," Alexis said, surveying him coldly, "that the next time I'm going to swing a little harder."

Nevertheless, she did as he commanded, though sulkily. Andrew Stock was a man used to getting his own way. He ignored her frigid goodbye at the hotel entrance, leaning out of the cab window to call back, "Be ready at five—I don't like to wait."

Alexis crossed the lobby, muttering to herself but already debating what she would wear. The clerk hailed her. "Oh, Miss Gilmore, there's a telegram for you."

She tore it open with excited fingers. It was from Chicago. THINK I HAVE FOUND SOLUTION. MEET MEG AND ME AT MERRIMAN PENTHOUSE SOONEST. TERESA.

"Bad news?" the clerk asked.

"Quite the opposite. But I have to leave immediately. Will you get me a seat on the first flight to Chicago?" Alexis chuckled suddenly. "Oh, and when Lieutenant Stock calls tonight, tell him not to bother to wait."

She raced upstairs. Before she finished changing, the desk called that her reservation was made and a cab was waiting. Her last act before leaving was to burn Teresa's telegram in the ashtray.

"Now let's see what your big male mind makes of that," she murmured. . . .

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On that same afternoon Teresa Tolan landed at Chicago's International Airport. It had been a short and pleasant trip, enlivened by her seat companion, a young advertising account executive. Their conversation had been gay and to a certain extent provocative; it was Teresa's natural gambit where men were concerned. It was a game to her, merely a way to kill time until more important matters came up. It was better than reading a book.

Consequently, once the flight was over, she declined the young man's offer of further companionship, including his services as guide, and rode into the city alone. Even had the circumstances been less grim, she would not have needed his help. Teresa had been raised on Oakley Boulevard near Polk Street, the intersection known familiarly as "Poke 'n Oak." She was coming home.

Her last name had not been Tolan then, nor did much else remain of the scrawny youngster with big ambitions. She had achieved them through a combination of beauty, energy—and Lewis Gilmore. Of the three, Teresa counted Gilmore the most important. She could scarcely realize that he was gone, so vital had been his friendship and guidance. He had been to her the father she had never known, and she was bleakly determined that he would be avenged.

Teresa hoped fervently that she would be the one to avenge Lew, rather than Alexis or Meg. Particularly Meg. Not that she disliked Meg; she even admired her keen intellect. But since what Teresa admired, Teresa desired, she looked forward to proving herself the other woman's mental equal.

Of course, she admitted as the cab sped down Lakeshore Drive, I wouldn't be in Chicago at all if Meg hadn't figured out about the stamp box. That had taken some doing. In her father's absence Alexis had replenished his supply of postage stamps and put the box away in its proper drawer. Yet when she had found his body, the stamp box had been on top of his desk. There was no letter on his person, nor any way of telling how many stamps were missing. Meg had then thought of checking the speedometer of his car. Gilmore always left it at the airport to be serviced and the little lubrication sticker demonstrated the car's mileage to that point. However, the speedometer reading indicated that the automobile had traveled an extra fourteen miles, over and above the distance between the airport and Gilmore's home. Since the nearest village lay exactly seven miles from the farmhouse, the presumption was strong that Gilmore had made a middle-of-the-night visit to the tiny community after returning home. But why, when at that hour all the business establishments would have been closed?

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"Not all," Meg had said with a stroke of deduction that awed Teresa. "The post office would be open—at least the mail drops."

It seemed so simple then—the predawn journey, the missing stamps . . . Lewis Gilmore had sent someone, somewhere, a letter shortly before he died. That it had been important, they knew without debate. Knowing that much, they had to know more. Who had the letter been mailed to?

At first it had seemed hopeless, like searching for a needle in not one but in all the haystacks in the world. Then they had found the blotter, freshly placed before Gilmore's death, and from the blurred ink had finally deciphered a single name. *Otto.*

"Merriman Arms," the cab driver said, jerking his head at the tall gleaming building beside Lake Michigan. "This the right place, lady?"

"I hope so," Teresa murmured. He looked at her curiously. "Yes, it has to be."

She realized that her mission was a nebulous one at best. Nevertheless, they had believed the gamble worthwhile. The only Otto whom Gilmore had known was Otto Merriman, the hotel magnate whose establishments girdled the United States and were beginning to reach around the world. He now made his home in Chicago but once he had been a New Yorker and Gilmore had done some murals for the Merriman Plaza there, as well as serving with Merriman on the first New York Associated Charities Drive. As far as they knew, the two men were not close nor had they seen each other in several years. Why then had Gilmore chosen to write to him on the last night of his life? And, if their reasoning was correct and the letter contained some vital information, why hadn't Otto Merriman come forward on learning of Gilmore's death?

These were the questions that Teresa had come to Chicago to answer. The assignment had fallen to her, rather than either of the other women, because of her background. And, duty aside, it was to her liking. Otto Merriman was immensely wealthy and a bachelor—Teresa had no reluctance about making his acquaintance. You never could tell about opportunity.

The dapper young man at the desk eyed her appreciatively and read her name from the registration card. "You've stayed with us before, haven't you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, I thought I remembered you. Your face is very familiar."

Teresa smiled, satisfied, and didn't enlighten him. She followed the bellboy with her bags into the self-service elevator. She studied the control panel for a moment. Not seeing what she sought, she sighed for the benefit of the bellboy, who looked at her question-

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ingly. "These automatic elevators simply baffle me," Teresa told him. "All the buttons and gadgets—I'm always terrified that I'll push the wrong one and end up in the laundry room or some other place—perhaps even in Mr. Merriman's penthouse. I'd be so embarrassed I think I'd die."

The bellboy smiled tolerantly. "Not much danger of that. This elevator doesn't go to the service floors—and the penthouse control is on the other side here. You won't have any trouble.

"Thank you," Teresa murmured. "You don't know how that relieves my mind."

So far, so good. She knew now how to reach her quarry. The question remaining was the method that would best insure her success. The easy way was simply to telephone for an appointment, but this was also the easy way for Merriman to brush her off. And she would lose the advantage of surprise, which might be a factor in her favor. An immediate frontal attack seemed called for.

Teresa unpacked her wardrobe, carefully considering what she would wear into battle, and finally selected a simple white sheath. This costume had the advantage of being both feminine and businesslike, and she was vivid enough herself to make the lack of color a virtue. And when she had finished her grooming, she stood in front of the full-length mirror completely satisfied with the result. "You've come a long way from Poke 'n Oak, darling," she told her reflection.

She then left her suite and rang for the elevator; it arrived to do her bidding. She drew a deep breath and firmly pushed the penthouse control button.

The car moved smoothly up-upward. "Wouldn't I be surprised if I did end up in the laundry room?" she said aloud.

It was no laundry room to which the elevator brought her, but a short thickly carpeted hall that terminated in a massive teak door. It bore no name or number, which in itself indicated that this was her destination. The elevator doors closed behind her; she was alone. Resolutely Teresa marched forward and pushed the doorbell.

She could not hear the chiming but after a few seconds she detected the sound of footsteps approaching. As the door opened she assumed her most seductive smile. "Hello!"

The man facing her was elderly, white-haired, with a kindly ruddy face and pale blue eyes. He wore a neat business suit and a bow tie. "Good afternoon," he replied. "I expect you're from Holliwell's. Come in."

He held the door open for her and Teresa entered, marveling at how easy it had been. She didn't intend to carry on the deception but she waited until the door was

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closed behind her before she said, "I'm afraid I'm not who you think I am. My name is Teresa Tolan and I've come on a rather personal matter, Mr. Merriman."

He raised his bushy white eyebrows in surprise. "Oh? Well, in that case—"

"I know I should have phoned ahead," Teresa said hurriedly, "but this is so important that I just decided to barge in. Please let me talk to you."

"I'd be delighted—but you see, I'm not Mr. Merriman." He drew a ring of keys from his pocket, spun them around on his finger. "I'm Calvin, Mr. Merriman's houseman."

Teresa pursed her lips in chagrin. "I guess that makes us even. Could I see Mr. Merriman, then?"

"Mr. Merriman is hunting in Canada. I'm not sure when he'll be back. I just returned from vacation myself this morning to open up the penthouse. I assumed you were from the decorator's."

If Otto Merriman were out of town, that explained why Lewis Gilmore's last letter had gone unacknowledged. Unless . . . "I don't suppose any of Mr. Merriman's mail has been forwarded to him," she asked hopefully.

"No, he's quite out of touch—which is the real reason he likes to get away now and then. The hotel holds it for him in the safe. As a matter of fact, I just picked up the mail this afternoon."

Teresa glanced quickly around the foyer in which they stood and her heart took a sudden leap. On a table beside the closet door was a thick stack of mail, letters and packages and magazines. "What I'm actually interested in," she said, "is a letter that should be in the bunch you picked up. I wouldn't have to bother Mr. Merriman at all if I could just see it."

"Did you write it, Miss Tolan?"

"Well, no. It was written by a friend of mine." She edged closer to the table. "I know Mr. Merriman wouldn't mind if I—"

"I'm sorry." Calvin blocked her advance. "I can't give it to you."

"But it's terribly important! There's been a murder and that letter may have some information—" His tolerant smile made her flush. "I'm telling you the truth! If you don't believe me, open the letter yourself."

"What I believe is beside the point, Miss Tolan. I simply can't take the responsibility. I'm afraid you'll have to wait until Mr. Merriman returns."

Teresa pleaded. She cajoled. But though she utilized every bit of her persuasive charm, she was unable to sway the old houseman. Calvin gave the impression of having stood firm against the blandishments of beautiful women before. It was quite likely, considering the financial standing and marital status of his employer. Faced with his bland impervious-

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ness, she finally capitulated. "All right," she said wearily, "I'll wait for Mr. Merriman. Will you tell him about me as soon as he gets back?"

Calvin wrote down her name and room number and placed the memorandum on top of the stacked mail. Teresa had a final thought. "Would you mind at least looking through that stuff and telling me if the letter is there? I'd hate to be wasting my time."

He hesitated, then thumbed through the accumulated correspondence, glancing at the return addresses. When he paused to remove an envelope, Teresa blinked in surprise. It was a fat brown envelope, more of a package than the letter she had expected. But even from across the foyer she could recognize Lew's bold handwriting. "Is this it?" Calvin asked, holding it aloft.

Teresa tingled with eagerness. For an instant she debated seizing the package and fleeing. But she knew that this course would be foolhardy, so she repressed her excitement. "Thanks. I'll be expecting Mr. Merriman to call me."

Back in her own room, she vented her disappointment by kicking her hatbox viciously. "Damn, damn, damn!" she wailed. "Why couldn't he have been twenty years younger? What do I do now?" She knew the answer. Much as she hated to, she had to telephone Meg and recount her failure.

"I don't think there's anything to feel bad about," Meg said when Teresa had finished. "You've done beautifully."

"That's sweet of you to say so, pet, but—"

"But nothing. You've established that Lew did write to Merriman, which we weren't sure of before. And the fact that it's a package intrigues me. Do you suppose it might contain sketches? Well, we'll know for sure when Merriman gets back, whenever that may be."

"I got the impression he's expected any time."

"Well, you stick by that phone and let me know when you find out something."

Teresa felt better. Thinking it over, she realized that she had accomplished something, after all. Now all she had to do was wait.

However, after several minutes of it, Teresa discovered that waiting was bad for her nerves. Her forte was companionship, not solitude and contemplation. She sat wistfully by the window and stared down at the couples on the lake front. It was entirely possible that Otto Merriman might not return today—or tomorrow—or, indeed, for weeks. She wished fervently now that she had obeyed her impulse and taken the package by force. Jail would have been no worse than this enforced idleness.

It was only an hour after her call to Meg when the telephone buzzed softly, but Teresa leaped

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up with the eagerness of a reprieved prisoner. "Yes?"

"Miss Tolan?" It was a man's voice, low and pleasant. "This is Otto Merriman. I've just come in and Calvin has been telling me a rather confusing story, something about a letter . . ."

"I'm so glad you've called." Teresa forced her voice down to its normal throaty pitch. "It's very important that I talk to you. If I could come up now—"

"Better yet, let me stop by your room since I'm on my way out. Shall we say in five minutes?"

"Five minutes," Teresa agreed. She hung up and rushed to the closet. After an agonizing moment of indecision she seized a bouffant cocktail dress, powder blue, and began to struggle into it. This is it, she told herself; this time you can't fail. She plunged into the bathroom, grasping her hairbrush in one hand and her lipstick in the other. She studied her tense face in the mirror for a moment and began to grin. "After all," she murmured aloud, "he's only another man, beautiful."

This restored her perspective. Five minutes later, when the knock sounded on her hall door, Teresa went to admit her visitor, floating in calm composure. She was heartened by the involuntary tribute he bestowed as they came face to face, the slight widening of the eyes that told her he was impressed.

"I'm Otto Merriman," he said, though unnecessarily since he looked the way, in Teresa's opinion, Otto Merriman should look. He was a tall elegant man, rather slim without appearing bony. And though his temples were gray and there were also flecks of gray in his neat mustache, he didn't seem particularly aged, perhaps due to his smooth tanned skin that held no wrinkles, only an almost imperceptible scar along the dark hairline.

"Won't you come in, Mr. Merriman? I'm Teresa Tolan."

"Thank you." He took the chair she indicated, studying her intently. "Now I know," he said finally. "I have seen you before. Not in person, of course. You're Lew's model—the famous Gilmore Girl."

"Yes, I am," Teresa was flattered. "In a way, that's why I'm here."

"How is Lew, anyway? I haven't seen him in years."

"Lew's dead. It happened last week, a week ago today."

Merriman straightened incredulously. "Dead? Lew? But he was just a young man. How did it happen? An automobile accident—"

"He was shot. Last Monday night in his studio."

"Suicide," Merriman breathed, staring at her. "Why, that seems incredible! Of all the men in the world with something to live for . . ."

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"That's what we think, too. That's why we think he was murdered."

"We? You mean the police?"

"Not exactly." Teresa told him the story from the beginning. He frowned occasionally but didn't interrupt her with questions. "And so I came here to find out what was in the package he sent you."

"I see," he muttered. "I wish I'd known earlier. Lew murdered! I can't for the life of me imagine why he'd write me."

"Just the same, that's what he did. I saw the package myself this afternoon. Your houseman wouldn't let me have it." Teresa smiled. "I'm hoping that you'll be more cooperative."

"Of course," he agreed instantly, rising. "Anything I can do to help. Would you like to go up to the penthouse now?"

"Would I! If you hadn't called when you did, Mr. Merriman, I was seriously considering trying to burglarize the place."

As they rode up in the elevator, Merriman said thoughtfully, "You know, it's still entirely possible that this package has nothing to do with Lew's death."

"I can't believe that. I won't let myself believe it. That letter—or whatever it is—is our only chance to prove that Lew didn't kill himself."

"Lew was a fortunate man," he murmured, "to inspire such loyal friendship."

They reached the massive door that led to the penthouse. Merriman did not ring but opened it with a key and they entered. Calvin was not there to greet them but Teresa was relieved to see that the stack of mail still rested on the table. She crossed the foyer and began to rummage rapidly through it. She did it a second time, more slowly, and then looked blankly at Merriman.

"But it's got to be here," she faltered. "I saw it myself—a big brown envelope . . ."

"Let me look." He took the mail from her numb fingers and leafed through it. "Are you absolutely certain that you saw it, Miss Tolan?"

"Of course I saw it! You don't have to believe me—ask Calvin. He'll tell you that it was here."

"I believe you, naturally. It's just that—well, it doesn't seem to be here now, does it?"

Teresa shook her head in confusion. "We'd better ask Calvin. Perhaps he put it somewhere for safekeeping." Looking around for possible places, she saw the door to the closet.

Merriman took her elbow. "Calvin seems to have stepped out for a moment. I suggest we sit down and have a drink and wait for him to come back."

"All right," Teresa agreed. She turned with him toward the living room, then suddenly turned back. "But just to satisfy my curiosity—you know, it's possible that—"

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She opened the closet door.

For an instant she didn't understand what she saw. Then she put her hand to her mouth to cut off her scream. Calvin lay in a heap on the closet floor. The back of his white hair gleamed with a color that looked like red dye, but wasn't.

Merriman leaped forward with a choked exclamation and knelt beside the body of his houseman. After a moment he raised his head to stare unbelievingly at Tersea.

"Is he dead?" she whispered.

He nodded, swallowing hard. "Poor old chap. His heart's been bad for years. The blow only broke the skin but I guess the shock . . ."

"Score two," Teresa murmured, "for somebody. I guess we know now what happened to Lew's package."

Merriman rose, rubbing his forehead. "I think I'd better call the police." He started toward the phone, then halted. "Or perhaps not, at least for a few minutes—until you're safely in your room."

Teresa stared. "I don't understand."

"No one saw you come up here with me, and I think we'd better take advantage of that fact. Otherwise, you're going to be completely bogged down in a local police investigation. That won't help Lew, or you either. I'm thinking of the publicity."

"But the police will have to know about the package!"

"Why? It will only complicate matters, and perhaps put you in a rather peculiar position. After all, it's only your word that there was such a package."

"Just a minute!" Teresa exclaimed. "Are you suggesting that I killed Calvin?"

"Of course not—but the police might. And your mission will be delayed, perhaps for weeks—giving Lew's killer every opportunity to get away."

Teresa shook her head, confused. "I suppose you're right." What, she wondered, would Meg do in these circumstances?

"You go back to your room. I'll phone the police and later I'll come down and—well, perhaps both of us ought to phone this Meg of yours and see what she makes of this."

"All right." The thought of consulting with Meg relieved her. But Meg would want to know . . . "Just a minute." Reluctantly she kneeled beside the dead houseman. Though she hated the necessity, it was barely possible that Calvin's pockets held some clue. Meg would do it, she told herself sternly.

But she found nothing and, shuddering, allowed Merriman to escort her to the door. Once again she paused as a new and strange idea struck her. "Now that's peculiar!"

"I think we'd better hurry."

"The door reminded me. Calvin

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didn't have his keys—they're not in his pockets. Why should the man who killed him take his keys? He wouldn't want to get back in, certainly." She was speaking softly, thinking aloud. "But *you* had a key. And you didn't ring—almost as if you knew that Calvin couldn't let you in . . ."

Merriman didn't reply and Teresa raised her head to look at him. In his suddenly cold eyes she read the answer. "Why," she whispered incredulously, "you're not Otto Merriman at all!"

Of the three women, Meg Blair had spent the most difficult day. Alone in the brooding silence of the farmhouse it was impossible to forget the tragedy even for a moment. Lew had been so much a part of his home, they had spent so many happy hours here together, that Meg half expected to turn around at any time and find him grinning at her. Yet he was gone and she was alone—a widow without ever being a wife.

Her melancholy was deepened by her failure to accomplish the task she had set herself. By mid-afternoon she was forced to admit that she had got precisely nowhere. Her method had been to attack the problem in the same fashion as Lewis Gilmore attacked his painting, from the inside out. He had never been content merely to portray the surface of his subject. If called upon to sketch a building, he often would consult the original blueprints to learn the position of the supports and girders, even though they did not show in his finished painting. In the self-portrait which hung on the studio wall, he had worked with x-rays as well as a mirror.

"I suppose it's my own particular expression of the artist's inevitable self-doubt," he had told her once. "I feel compelled to be more meticulous than I really have to be. Isn't it a shame I'm not a genius? I'd make such a good one."

Meg had applied Lew's own methods to the problem of his death, but with only questionable success. In attempting to reconstruct the skeleton of murder behind the façade of suicide, her only tangible achievement thus far concerned the letter to Otto Merriman. If, indeed, such a letter actually existed. She had not yet heard any confirming word from Teresa.

Meg wondered if she had been reckless in sending Teresa and Alexis, also unreported, off on their particular missions. Alexis was so young and unskilled and Teresa . . . well, her many good qualities didn't include too generous a supply of brains. Besides, both were recognizable, one by her name, the other by her face. If the killer should discover what they were up to, the other two women might be walking into danger.

"While I sit here and do nothing

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but look at this damn telephone book," she murmured aloud.

The telephone directory.

Though meticulous in his working methods, Gilmore had been considerably less so in his personal life. He seldom bothered to keep an address book; when he wanted to phone someone outside his immediate circle, he often would tear the page he needed out of the directory. The phone book in the studio was a tattered wreck. Ordinarily Meg would have thought nothing of it.

However, on the morning of Gilmore's death, Alex had found the directory from the kitchen out of its place, lying open on the table. One page had been ripped out. But though they had searched thoroughly, they had been unable to find the missing page anywhere in the farmhouse. The conclusion seemed plain.

Lewis Gilmore had inexplicably hastened home from San Francisco not only to write a letter but also to make a phone call—and to a comparative stranger.

Who? From the directory in Alexis' bedroom Meg had carefully cut the corresponding page, feeling that it must contain a key to the murderer. The names began with *DILBECK* at the top of the first page and concluded with *DOLLARHIDE* at the bottom of the other side. In between were nearly eight hundred listings. And though she read them over and over, not one of the names held any significance for her. Even if she should begin at the top and phone each number—a staggering task—there was no guarantee that she would learn anything. Meg was stumped.

So it was with grateful relief that she received Alexis' call from San Francisco and listened to her excited recounting of what Alex had discovered. The name—John Lamarr—meant nothing to Meg but after a day of stalemate she was eager to grasp at anything.

Her exhilaration was short-lived, however. Though she went through Gilmore's effects diligently, she was unable to turn up anything even remotely connected with John Lamarr. Baffled, Meg began to consider the rest of Alexis' story. The most striking feature of it was the skull doodle. But what was its significance? Symbolically, it might be taken to represent death, as Pandro had suggested. Poison, too, was a possibility—or even, by straining the imagination, piracy. Yet none of these seemed to make any sense.

I'm pushing too hard, Meg told herself. There's an answer if I can only see it. Put myself in Lew's place . . .

She was interrupted by the telephone again and this time it was Teresa reporting from Chicago. What she heard made her forget the skull doodle as she struggled to assimilate Teresa's information.

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The mysterious letter, which heretofore had been little more than a hypothesis, actually existed—although in a somewhat different form from what Meg had anticipated.

A package . . . Suddenly it occurred to her why it would have to be a package. There would have been no reason for Gilmore to return home simply to write a letter. A letter could have been written anywhere, from San Francisco, even aboard the plane. Gilmore had returned home *to get something*—something that concerned himself, Otto Merriman, and, possibly, John Lamarr.

Meg turned to the big filing cabinets in the corner. The metal drawers were crammed with large folders that held a wealth of miscellany, photographs, clippings, sketches—the raw material from which Gilmore had constructed his paintings. The folders were alphabetically arranged. Since she had to begin somewhere, it seemed logical to heed the missing directory page and begin with the Ds. Meg drew forth an armful of folders and spread them out on the desk. She had done it all before but this time there was a difference. Before, she had searched the files for what they might contain; now she was looking for what was missing.

Two-thirds through the stack she paused with a slow thrill of excitement. The folder she studied was labeled *DOBRECHT, WALTER*. Unlike its fellows, it was nearly empty, containing only a single typewritten piece of paper. This consisted of a long list of book titles, legal volumes by the look of them. This was such a peculiar residue, so unlikely to be retained except as part of a larger collection, that Meg felt sure she was on the right track. For some reason, Gilmore had removed the rest of the Dobrecht file and sent it to Merriman on the night he died.

She sought confirmation from the crucial directory page. She found it. There was no Walter Dobrecht listed—but there was a Mrs. Vivian Dobrecht. The address was a bare twenty-minute drive from the farmhouse.

"I guess," Meg said aloud, "it's time for me to take a trip, too."

The Dobrecht address lay to the west of Gilmore's farmhouse, not far from the Hudson. It turned out to be something of an estate, a pretentious Georgian-style mansion set amid several acres of trees and grass. As she turned her car into the curving drive, Meg noticed that there was a *For Sale* sign hung prominently on the gate pillar.

The big house was so silent that she feared it might be empty. But when she rang the bell, footsteps approached, the door opened slightly, and a woman peered out at her. She was a sleek blonde

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of perhaps forty with handsome, almost theatrical, features.

"I'm Meg Blair. Are you Mrs. Dobrecht?"

"Yes, I am." The other woman did not open the door any wider. "If you've come about the house, it's already been sold. I'm sorry the sign hasn't been taken down—"

"I didn't come about the house. I wanted to talk to you—about your husband."

Vivian Dobrecht regarded her for a moment. "Come in," she said reluctantly. "Miss Blair, is it? I don't recall Walter mentioning you." She led Meg across the hall to the living room. "You'll have to excuse the way everything looks."

The windows were shuttered and the furniture shrouded in white dust covers. "I hope I'm not interrupting your packing," Meg apologized.

"It's quite all right. Actually, I expected to be gone before this—I'm taking a trip to Europe now that the house is sold—but things came up." She shrugged. "Please sit down somewhere and tell me what it is you want."

"I'm afraid it's going to sound odd. I want you to tell me about a phone call you got last week—a week ago tonight—from Lewis Gilmore."

Vivian frowned. "I don't quite understand. I received no phone call from Lewis Gilmore. I don't believe I even know him."

"When I said you got a phone call, I meant your husband as well."

Vivian lowered her eyes. "My husband has been dead for five years. I'm quite alone here. I'm afraid I can't help you, Miss Blair."

Until that moment there had been no real reason for Meg to doubt her. But something in her tone sounded false, a spurious pathos. Meg determined to probe deeper. "I'm very sorry. Forgive my asking—but was your husband's death a natural one?"

Vivian hesitated. "Perhaps not in the sense you mean. He was killed in an automobile accident. He was bringing up some tins of fuel oil in the station wagon one night, the roads were icy and—well, he must have been driving a little too fast." She looked away, her lower lip quivering. "We were never sure. Walter burned to death. There was no one around to help get him out."

"How terrible! I wonder if your husband was acquainted with Lewis Gilmore, since you don't seem to be. After all, he was practically your neighbor."

"Walter knew a good many people." Vivian said cautiously. "In his profession—he was a criminal lawyer—but I don't recall that—"

"That's surprising. I'm certain that Lew painted your husband's portrait."

"Oh." She was definitely flustered. "I'd forgotten all about that.

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Lewis Gilmore. Of course, that was the artist's name, now that I think about it. It's been so long—things tend to blur . . ."

"But you would remember a phone call last week?"

"I've already told you." Vivian assumed an expression of hauteur that seemed equally as counterfeit to Meg as her denial. "You'll have to excuse me."

Meg remained seated. "Since we've established that your husband knew Lewis Gilmore, perhaps you can remember if he also knew Otto Merriman."

Vivian made an impatient gesture. "Perhaps he did. Yes, I'm sure he did. I believe they served together on some charity drive. I don't see—"

"And John Lamarr?"

"I don't know. Why am I being badgered like this? You should be able to understand that these are very painful memories to me."

"They're painful to me, also. Lewis Gilmore and I were to have been married. But someone killed him, Mrs. Dobrecht, and I believe that the reason had something to do with your late husband."

"You must be mistaken."

"It's possible that I am," Meg agreed softly. "But I find it interesting that here are four men who knew each other and two of them are now dead, both of unnatural causes. Lew's murder was made to look like suicide. Could your husband's murder, then, have been made to look like an accident?"

Vivian stared at her. "But it was an accident! Look, I don't intend to have the past dug up again just when I'm beginning to forget. You get out of here."

"Before I go, I'd like to see the portrait Lew painted of your husband."

"That's quite out of the question. It's been packed away in the attic for years and I'm not going to dig it out simply to satisfy your morbid curiosity."

Since her refusal was emphatic there was nothing Meg could do about it. But on her way to the door she asked a final question. "Since you won't let me see the painting, will you at least tell me what the background was?"

"It was Walter's law library, if it's any of your business."

"I rather thought it was. I supposed the books are packed away, too."

"No," said Vivian with the air of scoring a small triumph, "I sold them years ago. Good afternoon, Miss Blair."

Well, what did that accomplish? Meg asked herself as she got in her car. Some connection had existed between Lew and Mrs. Dobrecht's dead husband, but she had known that already. The precise nature of the connection was still a mystery. Nor had she proved conclusively that Lew had phoned the Dobrecht house on the night he died. All that had really

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emerged from the interview was that the blonde widow was being less than candid, and even that might have an explanation that was not necessarily sinister.

Meg drove to the nearest town and located the newspaper office. It was close to quitting time but she was persuasive and at last was allowed to consult the bound files of five years before. She found the headline quickly. *NOTED LAWYER DIES IN HIGHWAY HOLOCAUST*. She studied the picture that accompanied the story. Walter Dobrecht had been a man of forty with pouchy eyes and a mouth that was somewhat froglike—a strong domineering face that would have lent itself well to Lew's style of painting. The facts of his death matched Mrs. Dobrecht's story.

Meg read succeeding issues for the account of Dobrecht's funeral. And there she paused for a long while. The list of honorary pallbearers was lengthy but three names leaped out at her. Otto Merriman, Lewis Gilmore . . . and John Lamarr.

(continued on page 117)

Thanks

EQMM's regular readers will remember that our housekeeper recently called for help in cleaning out a surprising number of old issues that were bulging her closets. She offered 10 assorted copies for one dollar—and the response was overwhelming.

Our housekeeper is most grateful, and reports that all copies prior to the 1956 and 1957 issues are now gone. And she offers a suggestion for the newer copies—they would make fine gifts for friends or relatives who do not read EQMM regularly. Further, she offers to enclose your gift cards with all such gift orders. Send in the address of the person you want to receive 10 assorted copies of 1956 and 1957 issues of EQMM (a $3.50 value!) together with $1—and a gift card, if you choose—and we will do the rest.

HOUSEKEEPER
ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE
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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**ELLERY QUEEN**
TITLE:	***Child Missing!***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVES:	Ellery Queen and Inspector Queen
LOCALE:	New York City
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Billy Harper's mother and father were on the verge of a divorce — and then seven-year-old Billy was kidnaped near the park . . .*

THE BILLY HARPER KIDNAPING CASE — in Sergeant Thomas Velie's quaint linguistic goulash — took the cake for kicking the form sheet in the brisket. For one thing — and there were others — the F.B.I. came into it at no time whatsoever. Inspector Queen explained the abstention of the Federal Bureau by saying that he could hardly bother J. Edgar's Ph.D.s with a crime problem that never amounted to more than child's play.

But the Inspector said that only after Ellery had solved the case. At the time it did not seem a simple business at all.

Billy Harper was seven years old — a bright but unfortunate child, everyone agreed. When you were seven, it was an unhappy experience to be taken away from your father's big house beside the park and to be installed in a little box of a hotel apartment across town with your swollen-nosed mother and a nurse who was pretty but hardly a substitute for your father.

Billy had heard bitter words like "divorce" and "No-I-won't-give-up-ten-years-of-my-life-quite-*that*-easily-Lloyd-Harper!" Also, some mysterious creature named "Jarryl Jones" had been booted about in the parental war which Billy had illegally heard raging from abovestairs that dreadful night. (This Jarryl Jones was a "model," it seemed, which made no sense at all, since models were airplanes and ships and things.) An unknown word, "infatuation," came into it several times, and a vaguely frightening one called "custody" which got both his parents

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very angry indeed. And finally Billy's mother said something icy-sharp about "a six months' trial separation," whatever that was, "after which, if you still think you want to marry this girl, Lloyd, I'll give you your divorce." And then his mother and Miss M'Govern had taken Billy away to the little box on the other side of the park, leaving his father behind. When Miss M'Govern took Billy to visit his father, which she did every Friday afternoon thereafter, the greatest man in the world was so tightly gentle it scared Billy, because that wasn't his father at all — in the old days he had bellowed and roughhoused wonderfully. It was like visiting a stranger. And as Billy roamed disconsolately over his old house from cellar to attic on those Friday afternoons, the house was a stranger, too. Whatever it meant, it was devastating.

And then Billy Harper was kidnaped.

He was snatched at a few minutes past 6 P.M. after the fifth consecutive Friday visit to his father's house. Miss M'Govern sobbed that she had turned her back on Billy for no more than a *second* — to post a letter at the West Side exit from the park on their way back from Mr. Harper's — but when she looked around Billy had disappeared.

At first Miss M'Govern had been annoyed, thinking he had darted back into the park against her strict injunction. But when she could not find him she became alarmed and sought a policeman. The policeman had no better luck. Calls from the park station to Mrs. Harper's apartment and Lloyd Harper's house brought Billy's parents on the run; each said that Billy had not come "home," and they quarreled over the sad ambiguous word while the desk sergeant tried patiently to get it all straight. With night coming on the entire park patrol was alerted for "a lost boy seven years of age"; by 3 A.M., when the last negative report was in, it dawned on everyone that Billy's disappearance might have a grimmer explanation and a general alarm went out.

Lloyd Harper was a wealthy man; the Harpers had been mentioned slyly in several recent newspaper columns; one columnist had stacked his story by referring to young Billy's Friday afternoon "commutation trips across the park."

It began to add up.

Inspector Queen of Headquarters entered the case at 8 o'clock the following morning. At 9:06 A.M. the postman on his regular rounds delivered Lloyd Harper's mail; at 9:12 A.M. Inspector Queen made a certain surreptitious telephone call; at 9:38 A.M. Ellery rang the Harper bell and was admitted by none other than Sergeant Velie of the Inspector's staff.

"This," the Sergeant announced to Ellery forbiddingly, "is one for the nanny goats."

Ellery found his father in the drawing room making like a spectator. The little Inspector came to him at once.

"The F.B.I.? No, not yet, son,"

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said the Inspector in an affable *sotto voce*. "It's kind of a funny case. . . . Yes, there's been a ransom note, but wait till Piggott's through with that nurse. . . . Who? Oh, the babe who's sitting there doing a burn. That's Jarryl Jones, the other woman. Harper had a date with her last night which of course he couldn't keep, and she stormed over first thing this morning to give him what-for and walked into this. Bet she's sorry, heh-heh! Shhh." Jarryl Jones was beautiful and Mibs Harper — at least this morning — was definitely not; nevertheless, Lloyd Harper stood over his wife's chair, stubble-cheeked and hollow-eyed, with his back to his great love.

Miss M'Govern talked breathily. No, she had nothing to hide. The letter which she had turned her back on little Billy Harper to post the day before? It had been addressed to her boy friend. Mr. Harper will tell you. Ralph Kleinschmidt is his name. Ralph Kleinschmidt had been the Harpers' chauffeur . . . sort of a hot-head, yes . . . he did drink a bit too much at times . . .

"I fired him two weeks ago for drunkenness," said Lloyd Harper shortly. "With no references. He got pretty nasty."

"Lloyd! Do you really think —?"

"So he's getting even," said Velie sadly. "Now you don't want to get mixed up in this, girlie, so what's the address you wrote on your letter to this guy?"

"General Delivery, Main Post Office," whispered Miss M'Govern. "We've corresponded that way before when one of us was on the wing looking for a job —"

"Where's Kleinschmidt's hideout?" barked Detective Piggott.

"I don't know! Won't you believe me? Anyway, Ralph wouldn't — "

At Inspector Queen's unexcited nod, Piggott took her down to headquarters.

"We're wasting valuable time," snarled Lloyd Harper.

"I want my baby," moaned Mibs Harper.

"That ransom note, Inspector —!"

"Yes, the ransom note," said Inspector Queen, producing an envelope. "Ellery, what do you make of this?"

The envelope was squarish and large, of heavy cream-colored crushed bond. Obviously expensive. Lloyd Harper's address was blocklettered in smeary pencil in a style so crude as almost to defy deciphering. The envelope had passed through the local substation the night before — from the postmark, about two hours after Billy Harper's abduction.

The single sheet of notepaper inside was made to fit a much smaller envelope. It was tinted mauve, a fine deckle-edged rag paper.

The same smeary, crude block-printing said, without salutation: *The price is 50 grand to get the kid back safe. Small bills in oilcloth bundle. Father to drive alone by southwest corner La Brea and Wilshire Boulevards, exactly 11:15 a.m. today, throw bundle to sidewalk, keep going. Follow orders or else.* There was no signature.

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"Mailed last night, couldn't possibly be delivered before this morning's mail," said Inspector Queen, "which was a few minutes past nine. . . ."

"I take it what you have in mind," murmured Ellery, "is that the southwest corner of La Brea and Wilshire Boulevards being located in only one city in the world — Los Angeles, California — and the time for deposit of the ransom money on said corner being set for 11:15 this morning, the whole thing's impossible."

"Which the kidnaper of course knows," said the Inspector. "It'll be a long time before you can go from Manhattan to Los Angeles in two hours. So you agree, Ellery, this note is a phony?"

"I agree," said Ellery, frowning at the note, "that something is awfully wrong. . . ."

"I want action!" shouted Billy's father.

"You, Mr. Harper, want a kick in the pants," said Inspector Queen unexpectedly. "I've been sniffing your premises." He took from his pocket a handful of large, squarish white envelopes. "Identical with the envelope the note came in. Your envelope, Mr. Harper. *You didn't snatch your own boy to get him away from his ma, now, did you?* And use the note as a red herring?"

Billy's father sank into a chair. "Mibs, I swear to you —"

"Where's Billy?" screamed his wife. "What did you do with my child, you — you baby-snatcher!"

"Oh, come off it, Mrs. H.," said a voice, and they all looked around to see the beautiful Miss Jones uncrossing her famous legs and rising to her much photographed height. "Take a look at that notepaper, Inspector. It's hers."

"Mrs. Harper's?" asked Ellery, elevating his brows.

"That's right. She wrote me a threatening letter on paper just like it only last week." Jarryl Jones laughed. "She's stashed the kid somewhere and sent the note, using one of Lloyd's envelopes to frame him for the foul deed. A woman scorned, et cetera . . . Darlin', you owe me a meal from last night. How about brunch?"

But Lloyd Harper was staring at his wife.

She said slowly, "Of course it isn't true. I wouldn't do a thing like that, Lloyd. And if I did, I wouldn't be so stupid as to use my own notepaper."

"Or me to use my own envelopes, Mibs," groaned Harper. "Anybody could have got hold of one of my envelopes, Inspector Queen — or for that matter of a sheet of my wife's stationery. Somebody's framing me — her — us!"

The Inspector patted his mustache agitatedly. Then he muttered, "Time," and took Ellery aside. "Son . . ."

"Let's wait," Ellery soothed him. "Till the Sergeant gets back."

"Velie? Where'd he go, Ellery?"

"I sent him over to our apartment to get something out of my newspaper file. I want to check my memory."

"Of *what?*"

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"Of a feature story I read a couple of Sundays ago, Dad. If I'm right, it's going to clear this thing up."

Sergeant Velie reappeared twenty minutes later, just after Inspector Queen received two reports — one that the nurse, Miss M'Govern, had not yet revealed the whereabouts of Ralph Kleinschmidt, the other that the all-night city-wide search for little Billy Harper had failed to turn up a trace of him. Mrs. Harper was weeping again, the beautiful Miss Jones was telling Mr. Harper off, and Mr. Harper was glaring at the beautiful Miss Jones with homicide in his bloodshot eyes.

"Thank you, Sergeant!" Ellery snatched the gaudy Sunday supplement and turned to the center spread. "Ah. . . . See this?" He flourished the newspaper. "It's the story of a kidnaping in California a year or so ago. The child was recovered when the F.B.I. caught the kidnaper, and the man was tried under the Lindbergh law and found guilty. He was executed a few weeks ago, which is why the story was rehashed in this Sunday feature. Now let me read you the original ransom note sent by the California kidnaper to the father of the kidnaped California child." And Ellery read, "*The price is 50 grand to get the kid back safe. Small bills in oilcloth bundle. Father to drive alone by southwest corner La Brea and Wilshire Boulevards, exactly 11:15 a.m. today . . .*"

"The same note," gasped Inspector Queen.

"Identical, Dad. Right down to the *Follow orders or else.* And that tells us," said Ellery, whirling, "who's behind the snatch of Billy Harper."

And everyone was as still as Billy's space helmet on his father's bust of George Washington.

"The kidnaper of Billy Harper," Ellery went on, waving the supplement, "not only used the ransom note in the year-old California case as the model for his ransom note, he even duplicated the Los Angeles street corner indicated in the California note as the place for the payment of the Harper money. That is, the kidnaper appointed an *impossible* meeting place! Why should he have done this? If the kidnaping of Billy were a blind — if, let us say, Mr. Harper wanted to take possession of his little boy and make it seem to everyone, especially his wife, like an outside abduction for the usual ransom — he would hardly have designated an impossible place for the 'payment' of the ransom, making the whole business suspect at once, when all he had to do was name a rendezvous in the New York area and simply fail to have his mythical 'kidnaper' show up. The criminal would be thought to have changed his mind or been scared off.

"So the designation of Los Angeles as the payoff place in the Harper case makes utterly no sense — that is," said Ellery softly, "if you think of the kidnaper as someone with the capacity to realize how impossible it is. But suppose the writer of the Harper note *didn't* realize that New York and Los

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Angeles are three thousand miles apart?"

"Why, Maestro," said Sergeant Velie, "a moron knows that."

"An adult moron, perhaps, Sergeant," said Ellery with a smile. "But even a bright little boy of seven may be excused for his ignorance. Mr. and Mrs. Harper, I'm happy to say that your son Billy was kidnaped by none other than — *himself!* This Sunday supplement story probably gave him the idea, and in his enthusiasm he copied the California ransom note word for word. He used a sheet of your notepaper, Mrs. Harper, and one of your envelopes, Mr. Harper, not realizing that in doing so he was implicating both his mommy and his daddy. . . . Where is he?" Ellery grinned in answer to Billy Harper's father's rather grim question. "Well, my hunch is — based on this and that — that Billy went back across the park last evening, after giving Miss M'Govern the slip, and sneaked into this very house, Mr. Harper. . . ."

They found young Billy holed up behind an old trunk in the attic surrounded by the crusts of six cream cheese and jelly sandwiches, two empty milk bottles, and thirteen comic books. Definitely awed, Sergeant Velie counted them. Billy said he had snatched himself 'cause it seemed like a nexcitin' thing to do. But Ellery has always held the young man to be a psychological prodigy who knew just what to do to make two rather difficult adults patch up his personal world again. There is no way of proving this, but it is significant that Miss Jarryl Jones was seen with Lloyd Harper no more and Mrs. Harper moved right back across the park.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HELEN NIELSEN**

TITLE: ***This Man Is Dangerous***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Ben Lucas

LOCALE: California

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *As a detective, Ben Lucas was a failure. He had his limitations and he knew them. Captain Daly and Lieutenant Brannigan knew them too. Then why didn't Ben's wife realize them? Why did she keep nagging?*

THE MORNING NEWSCAST REPEATED a bulletin that had been going out over the airwaves for more than twelve hours: *"Police are still searching for the unidentified killer of Harvey Thompson, State Department of Highways worker, whose body was found near Soledad Pass yesterday afternoon. Description of the killer follows: height, six foot-two; weight, two hundred pounds; dark eyes and dark bushy hair; wearing faded denim trousers and jacket. Right hand may be bandaged as a result of smashing the cab window of the victim's truck with his fist. Anyone seeing this man is urged to contact local authorities at once. This man is dangerous . . ."*

Ben Lucas listened to the bulletin without comment. He could have repeated it verbatim. He poured himself a second cup of coffee—black and bitter to match his mood—and pretended not to be aware of Lore's eyes studying him across the table. Lore's eyes were gray and couldn't help being pretty even when worried. And being married twelve years to a policeman meant being worried most of the time.

"You were restless again last night," she said. "I think we need a new mattress."

"We need a lot of new things," Ben answered, "but on my salary we'll just go on needing them."

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Lore had her cue. This was one of the days not to discuss money. She tried again.

"Ruth Brannigan telephoned yesterday. She wanted to know when we could get together for Canasta again."

"With *Lieutenant* Brannigan? Don't tell me the big politician has time to play cards with commoners now that he's been promoted! Make an excuse—any excuse. I'm not going over there to eat crow à la Brannigan."

"Ben! Joe wouldn't—!"

"Wouldn't he? He's a changed man—Captain Daly's Number One Boy. Did I tell you he talked the captain into sending him out to Soledad Pass yesterday? The Sheriff's men can't find a killer without his help."

Ben finished off the second cup of coffee. The dregs were the bitterest of all. He looked up to see Lore still watching him.

"Ben." Slowly now. Any subject was combustible on such a morning. "Have you told Captain Daly about your plan for a Junior Patrol to work with the department on the juvenile delinquency problem?"

"A sergeant doesn't tell a captain how to run his department," Ben said.

"But it was such a good idea. You have so many good ideas, but they never get any farther than the breakfast table. Maybe if you spoke up the way Joe does—"

Ben shoved back his chair.

"If you wanted a dynamic husband, you should have married Joe Brannigan," he said. "And if you want the car for shopping today, you'll have to drive me to work—unless you want to go out with Ruth. Joe tells me he's bought her one of those little foreign jobs."

Ben was on his feet by this time. Lore stood up and slid her arms around his neck.

"I'm not complaining," she said softly.

Lore never complained. If she'd nagged enough he might have had to become Chief in self-defense, or at least he'd have had a bad-tempered wife to blame for his failure. But Lore was patient and she loved him, and with the news over and the radio playing something sentimental for early morning nerves, Ben felt even more of a heel than before she wrapped her arms about his neck. Lore just couldn't seem to understand that she'd married a failure.

Ben didn't have time to explain. The music stopped abruptly, and the announcer broke in with a terse bulletin:

"The police have just announced the discovery of two bodies, a man and a woman, on the Saugus road west of Highway Six. The location and nature of the deaths suggest strongly that two additional murders may have been committed by the man who yesterday clubbed to death a State Highway Department worker near Soledad Pass. A de-

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scription of the killer follows . . ."

Ben pulled Lore's arms away from his neck and switched off the radio. It was time to go to work.

Captain Daly had no doubts, none whatever.

"It's the same man," he said. "The same general area—the same senseless violence. The co-worker who saw Thompson's murder from across the road says the killing was provoked by nothing more than Thompson's ordering the fellow to get out of the way of the equipment. It doesn't take much imagination to know what happened last night."

It didn't take any imagination. A rancher driving into the wholesale market had picked the bodies up in his headlights shortly before dawn. Traffic was light on that road at night, and the man and woman had been dead a number of hours by the time the coroner reached the scene. Tire tracks, an imprint of a jack on the crusty shoulder, and a bloodstained tire iron near the bodies told the story. A man on the run—and this man had been running since late in the afternoon—wouldn't hesitate to acquire any means of transportation. He'd also acquired any identification and money the man and woman had carried. They were an elderly couple. Quiet-looking, harmless sort of people.

"The tire tracks seem to be of a small-make car," Daly said. "We'll know more about it after the lab men make their report."

"It's probably over the border by this time," Joe Brannigan observed. "It might be a good idea if I took a run down there and nosed around."

If anyone other than Joe Brannigan had suggested the killer had headed for Mexico, Ben would have kept silent. It was a logical supposition. But Joe's promotion and Lore's breakfast conversation had put Ben in an argumentive mood.

"You may be jumping at conclusions," he said. "It's a lot easier to get lost in a crowd than any place else."

"But this man's a killer, a madman. His description's been broadcast for hours."

"Sure it has, and I could go out right now and round up fifty skid-row derelicts to fit it—busted hand and all. As for being mad, sometimes they're the shrewdest when the chips are down."

It wasn't important. It wasn't Ben's case. It was Brannigan's and he'd handle it in his own way. He'd wait for the lab report and then start mentally to reconstruct the car. He'd get everything he could off that tire iron. Fingerprints, probably—the loonies were careless about such things. He'd handle the case efficiently and scientifically, because that was the way Brannigan operated, and that was why Brannigan was now a lieutenant. Ben

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knew all these things, but knowing them didn't help.

Brannigan was already working. He'd been staring at a map on the wall behind the captain's desk.

"I've been thinking," he said. "It must have taken the killer at least five hours to get from the scene of the first murder to the second. He must have been tired by then—tired enough to kill again in order to get a car. He was also hungry and thirsty."

Captain Daly listened.

"And unless I'm mistaken, there's a roadside café just this side of the cutoff to the road where the bodies were found—one of those truck-driver diners, open all night."

"It's a possibility," Daly admitted. "If he did risk stopping there, somebody might remember the car."

"Exactly. With any kind of description, we can have him bottled up in no time. I'll take a run out there and see what I can dig up."

It wasn't Mexico, but it was action. For Ben there was quite another kind of action. A routine assignment. A fourteen-year-old girl had run away from her home in Fresno. She'd taken the school bus in the morning and failed to return after school. A police check showed that she had never arrived at school; a further check prodded the memory of a station attendant who'd seen a girl answering her description pick up a ride with one of his customers about ten o'clock in the morning. The same customer had just inquired where he could hit Route 99. He'd been visiting Yosemite, he had said, and was on his way to Burbank.

"Fresno sent down a snapshot," Captain Daly added, after the briefing. "You'd better take it with you."

The snapshot was slightly blurred—for identification purposes they always were. And the smile was a little too set and the pose too awkward. But anyone with half an eye could see what Ben saw.

"Cute kid," he said. "Maybe she doesn't want to be found."

"Mama and Papa think otherwise," Daly reminded, "and they're the taxpayers."

The taxpayers were always right. Anna Marie Sica had run away from home; Anna Marie Sica had to be found. The fact that Ben was probably starting off on a wild goose chase made no difference. In six months or so, some policeman in Fresno would recognize Anna Marie on the street and take her in for questioning, only to discover that she'd been home for six months and nobody had thought of notifying the authorities. But it was the taxpayers' money and they could throw it away any way they pleased.

Burbank. That didn't fool Ben. The Anna Maries were always Hollywood-bound. If she'd hitched a ride as far as Burbank, she could have made the rest of the trip by

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bus. This meant checking with the inter-community bus lines, interviewing ticket sellers and bus drivers to learn if a girl answering Anna Marie's description had asked any questions or behaved like a stranger some time during the previous afternoon or evening. If that failed to get a lead, he would check the larger bus lines. After that—well, there would be nothing to do but make the tedious tour of cheap hotels and rooming houses in the not so glamorous fringes of Hollywood. Runaways always had more imagination than money.

It was a job that could go on for days or weeks or even months. Scientific methods wouldn't do it; nothing but old-fashioned police work, which meant putting one foot after the other down on the pavement and passing that snapshot under the tired eyes of unresponsive room clerks until the print was dog-eared.

As the morning aged, the temperature rose and the smog thickened. Just around the corner from a small hotel where he had received another shake of the head to add to his collection, Ben found an antiquated drugstore with a marble-topped fountain backed by a sliding window into the pharmacy. It was a one-man operation—a small troubled man who glanced apprehensively toward a pair of teenaged loiterers at the magazine rack while mixing Ben's limeade.

"Don't like those kids hanging around in here," he muttered. "Don't trust 'em."

"Then why don't you tell them to get out?" Ben asked.

"Think they'd pay any attention? Watch." He set down the glass in front of Ben and raised his voice. "If you're going to buy, buy!" he called out. "If you ain't, leave something fit for the cash customers."

One of the teen-agers turned his head slightly. The other reached for another magazine.

"See?" the druggist added. "Kids pay no attention nowadays. Mean, that's what they are. Mean and dishonest. Faces like angels and hearts black as Satan!"

As long as the druggist had brought up the subject, Ben brought out the snapshot.

"I'm looking for one now," he said. "Ran away from home yesterday morning."

"Then her parents are lucky! They should leave well enough alone. Know what happened to me last week? Some kids got into a fight over by that rack and nearly tore the place apart. Ran off before I could get a dime's worth of damages off any of 'em. And this morning—not half an hour ago—this sweet-looking girl with big brown eyes and a pretty orange ribbon in her hair came in and asked for a roll of gauze bandages and a bottle of iodine. Real sweet-looking kid, you know, not the bold brassy kind. But did I get fooled! When I gave her the package she grabbed it and

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ran out without paying. Just grabbed it and ran."

The druggist glanced at the snapshot—barely glanced. He was too wrought up over his own problems to worry about somebody else's.

"Bandages and iodine," Ben repeated. "Maybe somebody was hurt and she was upset."

"Sure, somebody she knifed! I tell you, kids are no good these days. And not only kids. Look at this killer the police are hunting. Three people dead—for what? That highway worker left a wife and three children—and that poor old couple coming all the way from Salt Lake City to Burbank just to visit their new grandson—"

"Burbank."

The word slipped off the top of Ben's mind. It was an instant later before he fully realized what the man had said.

"Where did you hear that?"

"On the radio. The bodies were identified about an hour ago. Name of Pratt—Mr. and Mrs. Pratt, from Salt Lake City. Their son expected his folks to drive in yesterday afternoon. When they didn't come last night, and still hadn't arrived by this morning, he went to the police. How's that for a shock? And for nothing—for nothing this guy killed them. The world's going crazy. That's all I can figure."

Ben didn't answer. For what he was thinking, he suspected his own sanity. How many tourists came into Burbank in a day, anyway? Hundreds. But the limeade wouldn't cost any more if he asked a few questions. He flashed the snapshot again along with his badge. Was there any resemblance between the picture and the girl who'd run out with the bandages and iodine? Any resemblance at all? The druggist squinted at the shot and finally admitted that there might be, except that the girl he'd seen wore her hair tied back and she'd looked older. Ben did not point out that any girl looks older with her hair tied back.

"Did she come in alone?" he asked. "Was she the only customer in the store at the time?"

"She came in alone—no. Yes, she did, at that. The man came in after she did."

"What man?"

"Some fellow. He stopped at the magazine stand. I didn't get a real good look at him. Just a glance before I started waiting on the girl."

"What about later—after she ran out with the package?"

The druggist shook his head. "Later I didn't notice. I was too excited yelling after the girl. When I got through he was gone. Say, what is this, officer? You think it was some sort of a team? You think somebody was setting my place up for a real job?"

Ben did not tell the druggist what he thought. He paid for his limeade and went back to Captain Daly's office. He knew his idea was

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wild, but Lore's words were still in the back of his mind. He needed the captain to talk him out of them.

It didn't take long. Daly was at least polite. Brannigan, who came in while Ben was telling his story, was openly amused.

"I want to get this straight," Joe Brannigan said. "Do you mean to tell me you seriously think this incident has something to do with our manhunt? Just because a girl made off with some bandages and iodine?"

"The killer has an injured hand," Ben reminded. "We know that."

"And we also know how he got it. If your runaway girl had been riding with the old couple last night, she'd have been found in that ditch with them. I don't think this killer's the sentimental type."

"Neither do I," Ben admitted, "but he's the desperate type. He might be using her as a shield."

Ben was surprised to hear himself defending an argument that had started with nothing more than a wild guess. It was Brannigan's attitude that made him do it. Joe was too sure of himself now. He not only had an identification of the bodies, he also had a description of the car—the son of the victims had supplied it. The car was an old one—a '47 Plymouth sedan with the original light blue paint. A call had been put through to Salt Lake City for the registration, and Joe Brannigan was confident of a quick arrest once the cooperating forces knew exactly what they were looking for.

"But thanks for your interest, Ben. It shows you're on your toes."

Ben's toes were itching to plant a kick in the lieutenant's pants. That polite dismissal—! He had to make some rebuttal.

At the doorway he paused.

"You didn't find any trace of your man out at that café, did you?"

"No," Brannigan admitted.

"Naturally," Ben said. "Even a lunatic would know better than to show his face where it would be so conspicuous."

Ben left the office feeling like a schoolboy who has been bested in a fight and sticks out his tongue from a safe distance. So much for Lore and her ideas! He had better stick to his beat.

But in twelve years even Ben Lucas, he thought, couldn't avoid learning a few things. One of the things he had learned was that curiosity, while it might be fatal to a feline, was indispensable to a policeman. Over, above, and beyond his personal pique, he was still curious about a number of things—only one of which concerned the girl with the orange hair ribbon. Since he couldn't get the Pratt murders out of his mind, he decided to mull over just what it was about them that bothered him. When he sat down it was with

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a road map spread out before him. When he got up again, it was to go out and get some direct answers in the old-fashioned way.

Orin Pratt, Junior, lived in a small stucco house with a magnolia tree in front and a cocker spaniel in the backyard. In between were six rooms full of sadness, with the exception of a baby who had yet to learn the meaning of any tragedy greater than a late feeding. Ben made his business brief. Pratt was a stunned and stricken man.

"It all seems like a bad dream," he said. "It was their first trip out. Dad just closed up the barber shop for a few weeks and decided to make a real vacation of it."

"Sightseeing along the way, I suppose?" Ben suggested.

"That's right. Only yesterday morning we received this card—"

Pratt stepped over to a maple desk and thumbed through a stack of mail. On the desk was the photograph in a silver frame of an elderly couple standing side by side. The tall, stoop-shouldered man wearing bifocals was Orin Pratt twenty-five years hence.

Pratt returned with a postcard. On its face was a photograph of the courthouse at Reno. On the reverse was a message.

Dear Children,

Well, I guess this is where I get rid of Father. (Ha!) Having a wonderful trip. See you darlings sometime Thursday P.M.

Mother

Ben studied the postmark.

"You say you received this yesterday? It's postmarked three days ago."

"I guess the mails take a little time."

"That's not what I mean. Reno's less than five hundred miles away. Why do you suppose your parents were allowing two days to travel five hundred miles?"

Pratt thought it over.

"Well, Dad never drove very fast, and he didn't like to drive at night —his eyes bothered him. I suppose that's why he wandered off on that side road last night. It's the only reason I can think of—"

Pratt's voice broke. He needed a few seconds to regain his self-control.

"If your parents were making a real vacation of it, as you say, maybe they planned a stopover somewhere between here and Reno," Ben went on. "I don't suppose you know their route?"

Pratt shook his head. He didn't know; obviously, he didn't know why it should be important. What Ben couldn't explain to Captain Daly, he could to Orin Pratt. There was a reason for his question. If they knew the route the old man had taken, it would be possible to check back and ascertain where he had last filled the gas tank. Knowing that, they could then figure about how far the car might have traveled before running low on gas again.

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Pratt got the idea.

"I see. You could then check along the various roads and find out where the killer might have bought gas."

"Or abandoned the car," Ben added.

"Do you think that's what he did."

Now Ben could get it off his chest—the thing about the murders that had been bothering him all day.

"For more than twenty-four hours," he said, "the killer's description has been broadcast at regular intervals—plus, since this morning, the information that he was driving a car. Somebody, somewhere, should have had his memory prodded by all that publicity. But we haven't had a single report, not even a false alarm."

Brannigan should have thought of that. Daly should have thought of that. Ben should have told them. Instead, he was telling Orin Pratt, who considered the matter gravely and then called his wife. His wife was the letter-reader and the letter-writer of the family. If any communication concerning the projected route had passed between the two families, she would know.

Young Mrs. Pratt reflected for a few seconds.

"All I remember is what your mother wrote about the camera, Orin. You know. She said the boys at the barber shop had given your father a going-away present of a camera so he could bring back pictures of the waterfalls. Are there waterfalls somewhere in California, Sergeant?"

There are waterfalls in California.

Ben went back to headquarters in a state of suppressed excitement. A man had to play his hunches. However, he wasn't quite ready to face Daly again.

Since he was still supposed to be looking for Anna Marie Sica, he had the authority to put in long distance calls. He called Fresno. And he was lucky. The station attendant who had reported the initial lead on the girl was on duty. He was young, hardly more than a boy from the sound of his voice. Could he describe the car in which she'd hitched the ride? He couldn't. It was an old model, and he hadn't noticed. The license plates? Yes, they might have been from out of state. A lot of out-of-state cars used the road to Yosemite . . . What about the man? What was he like? How was he dressed? And was there a woman in the car?

Ben kept trying, but the boy kept coming up with nothing. He'd been busy with the delivery truck. It seemed that a woman had asked him for the keys to the restroom about that time, but he wasn't sure if she came from the same car . . . Ben kept at him doggedly. The boy must remember *something*. How about the girl?

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This time he got a response which went a long way toward explaining the other oversights. The girl was a very cute trick. A little skinny, but a nice shape. She'd been wearing a gray sweater and skirt with a kind of orange- or copper-colored coat thrown over her arm. And she'd had an orange-colored ribbon tying back her dark hair.

"Did you say an *orange* ribbon?"

The station attendant reaffirmed the color. Ben thanked him for his trouble and hung up.

The second time Ben went into Captain Daly's office, he knew exactly how to lay out his story. He had rehearsed it with young Orin Pratt even before picking up the additional information concerning Anna Marie's taste in hair ribbons. A full tank at Fresno meant the killer couldn't possibly have made it to the border without gassing up somewhere along the way—probably in the Los Angeles area. It would have been at night when business was slow, and a man with this killer's appearance—plus a broken hand—would be hard to forget. Of course, Ben couldn't prove that the Pratts had come by way of Yosemite and picked up Anna Marie in Fresno, any more than he could prove that the gauze-and-iodine thief had been Anna Marie running errands for a threatening captor; but neither could Joe Brannigan prove, until he actually made an arrest, that the killer had escaped to Mexico.

Captain Daly wasn't alone. An artist was putting the finishing touches to a sketch based on the description given by the eye witness to Thompson's murder. It was a grim face—a shaggy head of dark hair, small eyes set close to the narrow bridge of a large nose, a long jaw, a wide, thin-lipped mouth. The artist was drawing in shadows of beard-stubble when Ben entered.

"Better make the beard darker," Daly suggested. "It's had another day to grow. And add the denim jacket."

"He might not be wearing it any more," Ben said.

Daly looked up sharply.

"If he's got Pratt's car, he's got Pratt's luggage, Captain," Ben explained. "Pratt was a big man. The killer could wear his clothes."

The captain did not ask how he knew so much about Pratt. He considered the suggestion.

"That's true," he admitted. "I hadn't thought of that. As a matter of fact, he may even be clean-shaven if the old man carried a razor. But sketch the jacket in anyway for present purposes and get it right out. Get it to San Diego, too. Brannigan's on his way down there now."

The captain was a busy man. He started to turn away.

"San Diego?" Ben echoed.

"That's right. The San Diego police reported that a sedan answering the description of Pratt's Plymouth has been spotted by a heli-

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copter in the Laguna recreational area. Brannigan left half an hour ago."

Daly hesitated. "Did you want to see me about something?"

Ben stepped back out of the way. "It's not important," he said.

When Ben went back to the old drugstore with the marble-topped counter, he had about as much hope of making an arrest as of having tea on the moon. He was nowhere. It was a peculiar thing, he mused as he drowned his troubles in another limeade, how a man's injured pride could play such tricks on his mind. If nothing else, Ben Lucas was a realist. Yet he had chased out to Burbank and annoyed young Pratt, not to mention the call to Fresno, on nothing more than a wild hunch backed by a slow burn.

"Nonsense!" Lore chided in the back of his mind. "Your theory of what's happened to the killer is as good as Joe's. How do you know that sedan in Laguna isn't a false alarm?"

Ben didn't want to think about it. He was supposed to be looking for a runaway girl.

"All right, look for her," Lore said. "Ask the man."

Lore had been a nuisance all day. He had to get rid of her some way. When the druggist finished with a customer at the far end of the counter, Ben caught his eye and brought up the matter of the girl in the orange hair ribbon again.

"Was she wearing a jacket?" Ben asked. "An orange-colored jacket?"

The druggist wiped the sweat from his face.

"On a day like this? I didn't see any jacket."

"What about her dress? What color was that?"

"I don't think she was wearing a dress. A sweater, I think. That's right. It fit her kind of tight. So did the skirt."

"What color?" Ben persisted.

"I don't know. Light blue, gray, something like that—Hey, Chuck, I've got a delivery for you!"

Ben had to wait while the druggist hailed a lanky youth and sent him off with a package.

"Goes to a Mr. Payne at the hotel," he called after the youth. "Room Three-o-Six." He turned back to Ben. "Don't make deliveries as a rule," he explained, "but I've got a deal with the hotel around the corner. They let me put my card in all the rooms, and I make deliveries for anybody too lazy to walk downstairs. Now, what's all this about that girl again? You know who she is?"

"I may know," Ben answered. "The runaway I'm looking for left Fresno wearing a gray sweater and skirt and an orange ribbon in her hair."

"You don't say! I knew I hadn't seen her before—I mean, she's not one of the High School crowd. But I don't know where she went, that's the trouble."

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"She must have a room somewhere in this neighborhood," Ben said.

"Maybe in the hotel around the corner?"

"No, I checked there this morning. Wait a minute—"

"Forget something, Sergeant?"

"I forgot everything. No wonder I haven't been able to get a lead on this girl. I've been making inquiries about a girl traveling alone. She may not be alone at all. What about that man at the magazine stand? Sure you didn't see his face?"

The druggist focused on the now deserted stand as if trying to conjure up a vision. "No," he said at last, "I don't remember his face. Only the back of his head. His hair—that's it. It was real long. I remember thinking that there was a man who was going to get his dollar and a half's worth when he went to the barber—"

The druggist's eyes widened.

"Sergeant, do you believe lightning strikes twice in the same place?"

Ben started to turn toward the stand.

"No, I don't mean that. I mean the delivery I just sent over to the hotel. It was a real peculiar order. This fellow wanted shave cream and a razor, which isn't so peculiar, but he also wanted one item I hardly ever sell. Only had one in stock. He wanted a barber scissors."

When Ben made his return trip to the small hotel around the corner, the one and only elevator had already gone up and the indicator stood at the third floor. This gave him a few minutes to refresh the memory of a room clerk who began to notice a remarkable likeness in a snapshot he had barely glanced at on the first visit. With a little encouragement the clerk then came up with a registration card for one Oscar Payne and daughter, who had checked in late the previous night with luggage.

"Initialed, no doubt," Ben said.

Just then the elevator indicator began to swing downward and its progress occupied his attention. When the doors opened, the boy from the drugstore came out and Ben went to meet him.

"What hand did he pay you with," he asked, "the left or the right?"

The boy looked at him, puzzled.

"The left. The right was bandaged. He said he smashed it in a car door."

"So he did," Ben said, "so he did. Come along with me, son. I need you to help make another collection."

It was less than two minutes later when Ben rapped on the door of 306. When a deep voice asked who was there, the delivery boy spoke his lines.

"The boy from the drugstore. You gave me too much change, Mister. One of the singles is a five."

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The door opened and Ben stepped forward, gun in hand. In one vivid instant he saw the living replica of the artist's sketch—hair, eyes, long jaws with one cheek already lathered for the shave that would have to wait. When the door slammed back to meet him, it met a well-placed foot instead, and after that there was no more trouble. The dark-eyed girl trembling at the foot of the bed didn't cause any; and the crazy man, with a forty-five pointed at his chest, was as mild as a lamb.

By the time Lore came to take Ben home, everything was checked out. It was simple, once the sole survivor of the long ride from Fresno could tell her story. The old Plymouth was found at the rear of a used-car lot a couple of blocks from the hotel, where it had stood unnoticed by the proprietor all day. The tank was almost empty and the engine missed badly enough to explain both the abandonment and Pratt's inability to reach his destination before nightfall. Because a crazy man was sane enough to think of self-preservation, Anna Marie was alive; and because Anna Marie was imaginative and daring enough to steal the merchandise she had been ordered to purchase, and so call attention to herself, a killer was behind bars. Only when enough time had elapsed to make him think she had been unsuccessful had he risked telephoning for the rest of the order. It was all so neat that Ben began to feel more like a lucky bystander than a hard-working officer who had turned a hunch into a double victory.

"And Orin Pratt, Senior, a barber!" Captain Daly snorted. "You'd think he'd have had a shave kit and scissors in his bag."

"I once had an uncle who was a barber," Ben remarked. "There were just two things in life he refused to do—shave himself and cut his own hair."

It was all as clear as the initials on the crazy man's bag—O. P. for Oscar Payne, whose real identity was being traced through a maze of police and mental institution files.

Ben went home. Lore had heard all about it on the radio.

"You see, I told you," she said. "Your ideas are good. All you have to do is speak up and the captain will listen."

Ben didn't argue with her. He was too much at peace with the world to argue about anything. In fact, thinking about Joe Brannigan making that long ride back from San Diego with nothing but the mileage to show for his trouble, Ben felt a sudden wave of magnanimity.

"Why don't you give Ruth Brannigan a buzz tonight?" he suggested to Lore. "She's right, you know. We really ought to get together again for Canasta."

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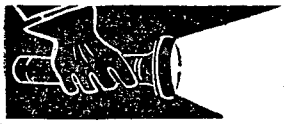

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

A correspondent suggests, probably rightly, that EQMM readers would like to see a complete listing of new volumes of short stories and novelets; but it would be hard to give more than a single star to Curt Cannon's I LIKE 'EM TOUGH (Gold Medal, 25¢), 6 skilful but shallow tales of sex and sadism which appeared in *Manhunt* as by Evan Hunter.

The fancier of short pieces will do better with reprint collections: Leslie Charteris' FEATURING THE SAINT (Avon, 25¢) and particularly his THE SAINT AROUND THE WORLD (Permabooks, 25¢); and Rex Stout's ALL ACES (Viking, $3.95), 2 novels and 3 novelets by the newly elected President of the Mystery Writers of America.

★★★★ **THE LONG FAREWELL, *by Michael Innes*** (Dodd, Mead, $2.95)
Urbane, witty, allusive, adroit murder-puzzle, in a vein much like the short cases of John Appleby which have appeared here.

★★★★ **A STIR OF ECHOES, *by Richard Matheson*** (Lippincott, $3)
Gifted young writer combines detection, science and a Woolrich-like sense of terror into a powerful "novel of menace."

★★★ **KILLER'S CHOICE, *by Ed McBain*** (Permabooks, 25¢)
Latest report on the 87th Precinct, which houses the most credible cops (and criminals) in American fiction.

★★★ **CORK IN THE DOGHOUSE, *by Macdonald Hastings*** (Knopf, $3)
Elderly and proper Mr. Cork tangles with dognaping, illicit dog-fighting and a memorable Staffordshire bitch named Honey. Hastings writes dogs as well as the Lockridges write cats.

★★★ **MURDER OF A WIFE, *by Henry Kuttner*** (Permabooks, 35¢)
Tragically posthumous novel is best yet among cases of Michael Gray, absorbingly blending psychoanalysis and action.

More good books are coming out than there is space to recommend in detail. Three solid stars each to George Harmon Coxe's THE IMPETUOUS MISTRESS (Knopf, $2.95), Anthony Gilbert's DEATH AGAINST THE CLOCK (Random, $2.95), Frances & Richard Lockridge's THE LONG SKELETON (Lippincott, $2.95), Allan MacKinnon's SUMMONS FROM BAGHDAD (Crime Club, $2.95) and Charles Williams' GIRL OUT BACK (Dell, 35¢).

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **AVRAM DAVIDSON**

TITLE: ***The Creator of Preludes***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Cummings was a sensitive modern artist. He had devoted his entire painting career to a series of* Preludes*—number 61 was now on the easel. The only flies in his contentment were his wife's unendurable parents.*

GEORGE CUMMINGS WAS PADDING lightly around in his slippers, viewing first from one angle and then from another a new thing in caseins he was working on, when he heard a slight noise from somewhere underneath his studio window. The studio was on the third floor of the house—indeed, it was the entire third floor—and usually he never heard slight noises when he was working. He had been absorbed for hours; the medium was not a new one for him, but the means were: he was using feathers. He had paused, then, for a minute, and he imagined he could hear the words with which Art Clathum would greet the new canvas. "There's a wonderful quality here, G.," he'd say. "A certain eagerness, not precisely tremulous, but certainly delicate." Something like that. Pity people still listened to men like Berenson, and looked to the dead, dead past, when critics of Clathum's stature (and painters of Cummings') were ignored by all but a few.

Someone was walking around below.

He started to go to the window, paused, then looked again, lovingly, at the canvas. What else would Art say? "I notice, too, the gradual change in tonal values. The hesitancy is giving way to a firm awareness. I might even say, to a vigorous, almost brutal, direct approach. And the colors, too . . . less pink, less gray. Those reds and purples, G.—" He'd say this be-

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cause it was in the painter's own mind. And his mind and Art Clathum's were so very close.

Cummings approached the window cautiously and peered out. He drew back at once, swearing silently. It was Lina's parents—the Weird Twins. What the hell brought *them* here? And why, of all times, now?

How characteristic, too, was their approach! No straightforward ring at the front door. Prowling around, peeking in windows, cautiously testing and tugging at the side and back doors. There might perhaps be in-laws who were tolerable, but as a general rule—and without question in his own particular case—how much better it would be if in-laws committed suttee or drank a cup of hemlock as soon as their children married.

Perhaps if he remained very still they would go away. Fortunately he was wearing slippers. But he knew it was a vain hope. Even if the place were boarded shut it wouldn't keep them out. They'd go to the real estate office in the village which managed the property and tell some cunning lie of the sort which only their peasant shrewdness could conceive—Lina had given them the keys and asked them to come down, only the keys were mislaid—and so they'd cozen other keys from the agent, who only knew the trickery of business and would be no match for them. . . . . Better change the locks, he told himself, and glanced at the clock. Ten. They must have got up at dawn. And where had they parked the car? How like them not to have driven up to the house and thus have given him some warning! Well, it would be interesting to see how long they'd hover around, how long they could hold out.

Down below a sibilant whispering began. After a while they would raise their voices. Cummings sighed, shook his head. The same old gambits. They were, of course, waiting for Lina to appear, so they could go through their traditional series of little cries and noises: surprise, anticipation of welcome, delight. Scanning her face for the sight of her emotions, looking at each other, then taking a double pleasure in their daughter's responses. He clenched his fists. Why couldn't they act like anyone else? Call or write that they were coming, drive up to the front door, ring the bell . . . Lina, at first, had taken their irritating ways for granted. After all, she grew up with them. But, by and by, she'd come to realize how odd, how gauche, how impossible it all was, and then she began to excuse it—realizing finally (or almost finally) how utterly beyond excuse it all was. But the process was slow, terribly slow.

Mrs. Grasko cleared her throat. Mr. Grasko coughed. Cummings hoped they would both choke. If

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he could have persuaded Lina, they'd have moved farther away at the very beginning. But this was all the distance he could manage. It reduced the number of visits, but even one a month was one too many.

"Ten o'clock," Mr. Grasko said. "Maybe she's sleeping late?" She—no reference to him. It was always that way.

"Of course she's up," the old lady said. Then the nervous laugh, no pretense to mirth, but still demanding from you at least a smile in confirmation.

Cummings waited, visualizing their taut expressions, their exchange of frowns. Then the old man said, "We can sit on the front porch. We won't disturb." As if they hadn't already crept on noiseless feet to test the porch door. Finally, Cummings felt he'd had enough. He picked up the heavy unabridged dictionary and let it fall. Above the noise of the thud he heard with pleasure the old woman's startled squeal, the old man's frightened grunt. Then, silently on his slippered feet, he made his way downstairs, out the front door, and came upon the Graskos from behind.

As usual, the sight of them made his gorge rise. It wasn't merely that they were ugly and ignorant. It was that they obviously never realized it. Which made them impossibly ugly, unendurably ignorant. Art Clathum had said to him (and that was another thing, they'd never tactfully vanish when his friends appeared, but would stay on, peering, listening, exchanging glances, and actually speaking, thus making their stupidity manifest, their coarseness palpable), "How did such a pair of trolls ever produce a pretty girl like Lina?—a naiad, a peri—"

How indeed? "The old woman," Art had said, "looks like an unfrocked stevedore. The old man, I'm sure, has nails in his feet and sleeps standing up." And Mrs. Grasko had, unwittingly, confirmed Art's judgment, even before it was uttered. When first faced with Lina's intention to marry Cummings, Mrs. Grasko had felt it necessary to recapitulate her husband's and her own hard struggles in America—as if it had any bearing on the facts. The Mister, she lamented, had worked like a horse—like a horse—and she had worked just as hard—just as hard. Well, it figured. He'd lived like a horse, instead of like a human being, and so he came to look like a horse and to think like a horse.

And what can a team of horses expect to know about modern art? If Cummings had been a house painter—or even, as they put it, "a picture painter"—

Finally brought, unwillingly (it was Lina's wish, not his!) to Cummings tiny studio, and face to face with his canvases, they had merely gaped. "This is called *Prel-*

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ude 27," the artist said, smiling faintly, gesturing to the easel. "The leading art critic of our time, Arthur Clathum, of whom I'm sure you've heard, refers to the *Preludes* as 'polychromatic compositions reflecting the barely perceptible undertones of the static city-state—phenomena of pure meditation.' "

Knowing nothing of form or execution, the Grasko pair (he was already beginning to think of them as The Weird Twins) naturally asked about the only aspect of art they could be expected to grasp. "How much do you get for one?"

"They are priced at $350 each," Cummings had said—and added, knowing how Clathum and his other friends would hold their sides when they heard, "but for you I'll take off 15 per cent, and if you buy five I'll take off 20 per cent. For a dozen—"

How hastily the old woman, the she-troll, her heavy underslung jaw working frantically, had said, "We have no room, we have no room!" And threw an agonized look at her mate, lest he be trapped into buying.

At once the old man put his long face into motion, shook his head. Then he asked, "You sell many of them? Huh? How many you sell?"

Lina had then interposed. "Everyone agrees that George is one of the most—"

"But how many he *sells?"* insisted the old horse.

"The 7th and 13th *Preludes* have been acquired by the L. C. Griffith Collection of Contemporary Art," said Cummings. And, naturally, they couldn't let it rest at that, but must worry it, like a dog with a bone. He sold only *two?* He only sold *two?* Then the sluices were opened. How long has he been painting? He has no other job? How does he live? And then the flood crested: How will *you* live? How can he support you?

Cummings, bored, had gone over to a corner to clean his brushes. He was still using brushes at that time.

Lina, proudly—and yet a bit fearfully—said her piece. The trolls were looking at her, mouths open, heads cocked to one side, sure that their simple mathematics had convinced her. When they heard her say, "Everything I have I want to share with him," the old man had gaped, not grasping what she meant. But the ugly old woman, fingering her seamed face, understood at once. She let out a wail.

"Uncle's money! She means Uncle's money!"

And the old man: "No. No, baby. No, no, no."

"Uncle" (Cummings never tried to pronounce his real name) was actually a cousin who had lived with them for thirty years. After thirty years of equine toil, he had overcome his peasant fear of lawyers and had actually made a will leaving his sweat-stained estate (in-

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surance included) to Lina as a present for her twenty-first birthday. And then died. Cummings rather liked Uncle. There is nothing more considerate than a well-timed death.

He then put down the brushes and took Lina in his arms. The old trolls each took a step forward, then stopped, their arms stretched out. "I hope you'll come to our wedding," Cummings said, politely.

"I'll die!" keened the old woman. "Lina, I'll die!"

But she didn't, damn her—she didn't. And so he and Lina were married quietly and came to tell the Graskos. Her father had reared up from his kitchen chair and waved his huge, calloused hands. "I should tear your head off!" he bellowed, while his wife sobbed into her apron. "I should kill you! It was all very tiresome. And when, finally, they had subsided, the news that the young couple was buying a house farther upstate set them off again.

"So far? So far away? Why, baby? No—don't."

"George needs a quiet place to work in, Papa."

"Nearer, there are quiet places. Don't move far away, baby. We have only you."

Cummings tightened his arm around Lina. She said, with only a slight trembling of body and voice, "I'm not your baby any more, Mama. My life is with my husband from now on. But you'll come and see us."

And, sure enough, they had. And had made scenes (though no longer in front of *him*) when he and Lina had, as was natural enough, taken out insurance on each other's life and made mutually beneficial wills. He could still hear their half-whispered voices: "But what does *he* have to leave *you?* Huh? His paintings? Nothing worth. Nobody buys." And when Lina, worn down by persistent questions, finally announced that no children were planned for the near future: "He wants you only for himself"— which was true enough, why not? And the she-troll sent her mate out to stare blankly at the patio while she whispered a peasant trick to deceive Cummings . . .

It was becoming unbearable. Whenever it did seem as if Lina was coming to the point where she would put a stop to it all by herself, something would happen—a squabble between the two of them, perhaps—and she'd backslide. It was unendurable. He couldn't stay shackled that way forever. It was inevitable that something . . .

Cummings walked up silently behind the Graskos and stopped about five feet away. He must have stood there for a full minute, watching them squint up at the house, before the old woman noticed him. She gave a squeak of

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fright and clutched her husband. They swung around, awkwardly, to face him. Cummings said nothing.

Finally Mrs. Grasko gave her empty chuckle, scanned his face, and, seeing nothing, spoke at last. "Lina is sleeping?"

Cummings said, "No."

The old couple glanced nervously at one another. Cummings said, "Is the mail no longer being delivered? Are all the telephone lines down?"

"Huh?" from Mr. Grasko.

"Lina went to the village?" from Mrs. Grasko.

His anger and his desire for them to be gone rose in Cumming's throat. "I have, heaven knows, expressed to you often that you notify us before you come. It is inconceivable to me that you have never once done so. Consequently you find me alone, and quite unable to entertain you."

They merely stared at him. Then —"Alone?" repeated the old man.

And—"Lina's not here?" asked the old woman.

Cummings remained silent.

"Where is she?" they both asked, after a few seconds.

"Gone to visit a friend. I can't ask you in because I've nothing prepared for visitors, and besides I'm very busy. Had you notified us—"

But it was all wasted. Where was Lina? She had gone to visit a *friend*. What friend? One whose name would mean nothing to them. When did she go? Yesterday. The friend lived in the village? No. Where did the friend live? It was of no importance to them where she lived. Oh, the friend was a lady friend? What was the lady friend's name and where did she live?

All this with pauses and side glances and whispers in their native language. Finally Cummings looked at his watch. Old Mrs. Grasko said, "We'll bring up the car and we'll wait for her. We won't bother you. We'll just wait for her in the car. We have food."

At this Cummings lost his temper. He swore aloud and cried out at them, "No, you won't bring up your damned car and wait for her! She may not be back for days! I don't want you hanging around! Just get out of here and don't come back till you're asked!"

They backed away from him. The old woman looked at the house. "Lina," she called. "Lina? Baby? It's me . . . Mama is here!" And they walked around the house calling out to Lina. After a while they went away, walking slowly, constantly looking back.

Cummings went inside, locking the door. He started to go back to his studio, but found that he was trembling, and sat down, instead. He looked around him. It was a beautifully furnished little house. Uncle's insurance had paid for it—just as the rent from the

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houses Uncle's estate consisted of, maintained it.

It wasn't eleven yet, but Cummings poured himself a drink and gulped it down. Then he went upstairs. He looked at *Prelude 61* on the easel, but at the moment he didn't feel like casein or feathers. There was another canvas prepared, so he put it in place of the half-done work, took out oils and brushes and palette knives. Quickly he began to work, laying on heavy blobs and smearing with violent strokes, scraping the colors—the reds and purples very dark—and then greens and angry yellows and dead black . . .

The bell began to ring, and as it penetrated his mind there came with it the sound of an automobile, which had preceded the bell. Reluctantly he set down the palette, the brush, the knives, and clumped downstairs.

"Hello, Mr. Cummings," said the man at the door. "I'm sorry to bother you, but, um—" Looking past him, Cummings saw The Weird Twins standing at the bottom of the steps, craning upward. The man spoke again. "Uh, maybe you remember me—"

Remember him? Of course. The time some high school kid, celebrating a basketball win, had broken into the house with two friends and taken a case of beer—the deputy sheriff's name was Pelton.

"Edgar Pelton, isn't it?"

The man smiled. He seemed relieved, but not for long. A friendly type, all red hair and freckles and (faced with the panorama of *Preludes* on the walls of the Cummings house) awed ignorance. He shifted now, then half glanced at the troll-couple behind him.

"What can I do for you, Sheriff?"

Pelton grimaced. "Well, it's, uh, not for *me*. I mean—these folks say that they're your in-laws—and you chased 'em off the property—and you wouldn't let 'em see your wife."

Cummings said that it hardly seemed a matter for the sheriff's office, even if true—and it was not true. He'd asked them to leave, yes, because they'd worn out their welcome and he was busy. As for refusing to let them see his wife, she wasn't here to be seen.

"Gone off to visit a friend, I understand?" Cummings said that was so. "Well, it's just a minor question, really, but it seems it'll put their minds at ease—your in-laws, mean to say—if you could just say like *what* friend?"

The Graskos had come up the stairs and were now standing behind the deputy. Cummings gave them barely a look as they glowered. "I'm afraid I can't, Pelton. She asked me not to."

The old woman burst out, "I don't believe! I don't believe!"

And the he-troll said, thickly, "He tells you lies!"

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Before anything else could be said, the old woman gave a gasp and, her face fixed in a grimace, she ran up the steps and shoved Cummings aside in her race into the house. "Lina!" she screamed. "Baby!"

Her husband growled and lumbered after her. "Don't try to stop!" he flung at Cummings. The latter went pale. Then, as he shrugged, the color came back to his face. He said to Pelton, "Would you please come inside and restrain those two? Better still, get them out of here."

Flinging her arms out and up, Mrs. Grasko emerged from her daughter's room.

"Everything there! How she could go away for days? Everything there!"

Pelton said, "Look, Mr. Cummings, tell them where your wife *is* and let 'em speak to her and then I'll get 'em out of here."

Cummings said, "No."

Pelton promptly said, "Then how come she didn't take anything with her?"

Cummings said she'd taken a small overnight bag.

"Liar!" shrieked old Grasko. "Where is my baby?"

Cummings added that he hadn't said she *would* be gone for days, only that she *might* be.

The Graskos, meanwhile, were working themselves up to a near frenzy. In many ways they had always been like children, utterly unable to master the art of dissimulation. The old woman faced him now, her ugly features once again distorted in a grimace of rage and fear, her hands clawing at the air.

"What did you done with her?" she screamed. "What? *What?*"

And the old man, baring his yellowed stumps of teeth as if he intended to leap upon his son-in-law and bite and tear to pieces, suddenly cried, "The letter! Yes, police-*man,* the letter! Ask him—ask him!" And he drew an envelope from his pocket and forced it on Pelton. As the latter took it, the two old people, utterly forgetting themselves in their frenzy, began to sob and wail loudly in their native tongue.

"Well, I never had nothing like this happen before," the deputy said uneasily. "Look, now, Cummings—" he'd already got past the stage of "Mister," Cummings noted—"this letter from your wife? Okay. Now, they claim she always *wrote* to them, in longhand—"

"Always, always! Ohhhh!"

"And that she didn't know how to type."

Cummings wiped his face on his sleeve. "She burned her hand, so she asked me to type it for her."

"Look! Look! How he lies! The name, police-*man*—see, the name!"

Pelton pointed to the signature. "They claim this ain't her writing."

Cummings insisted that it was,

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only that, because of the burn, Lina had held the pen awkwardly. The deputy considered this. Then, slowly, he shook his head. "I guess you'd better tell us just exactly where you claim your wife is and let's us see if we can raise her on the phone. And if we can't—" He halted, listening. The old couple ceased their noise. A car drove into the road, stopped, then drove off again. Feet approached the house.

Cummings went to the door. "Here she is now," he said.

Coming up the steps, her hair blown by the wind, Lina said, "Oh, dear . . . another quarrel with my parents?" And then, screaming and sobbing, the two old people threw themselves upon her, kissing, hugging, weeping.

"Baby, we didn't know—you're all right, Baby?"

"Lina, he wouldn't tell us—We thought—we thought—"

Cummings said, in a low voice to the deputy sheriff, "The 'baby,' mind you, is twenty-three years old and has been married for over a year." Pelton shook his head and muttered his sympathy.

"Listen," Lina said, disengaging herself, and looking at her husband and the deputy sheriff, "I don't understand. What's this all about? Why—"

Speaking slowly and deliberately, Cummings said, "Your parents called in the sheriff because they were afraid I'd murdered you and stuffed your body down the well, or under the cellar floor."

Lina said, "*What?* Oh, no, they couldn't! I went over yesterday to see a friend—she called me up and asked me to—you see, not so long ago she had a nervous breakdown, and so she doesn't like to be alone, and when her husband—"

Cummings explained, "I naturally felt, under the circumstances, that I couldn't tell my parents-in-law where it was because, first, the matter is such a confidential one, and second, because they would certainly have rushed over there at once, not knowing the meaning of the word 'tact', and third—"

Suddenly it all seemed to strike Lina at once. She drew away from her moaning mother and went up to her husband. He put his arm around her. "But how could they have thought—" she began, incredulously. "How could you have *dared?* You actually called in the police? You really believed—*Oh!*" She stared at them, aghast.

"Baby," her mother wept. "Baby, we didn't know—"

Lina shouted at her, "I'm not your baby any more! I'm a grown woman, a married woman, and I love and trust my husband! Get out of here! Take them away, Mr. Pelton, please . . . I don't want to *see* either of you again . . . Oh, darling," she turned to Cummings as Pelton grasped the old couple by the arms and led them away, still weeping and glancing back.

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"I'm so terribly sorry. How can I make it up to you?"

Aloud he said, whispering into her ear as she clung to him, "Shh . . . forget it." To himself he answered: How? Well, by really never seeing them again—by agreeing to move far, far away . . . The troll-twins had finally accomplished what he no longer had expected to achieve on his own. They had completely alienated their daughter, they had thrown the sympathy and caution of the law entirely on *his* side. Because—who could say?—eventually he might tire of the woman who now clung to him. Clinging could become tiresome.

In which case, today's events would be but a useful rehearsal—a sort of prelude, as it were . . .

COMING ATTRACTIONS . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **THOMAS WALSH**

TITLE: ***Girl in Danger***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Kelly and Holleran

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The trouble was, Kelly had something in his head that didn't belong there—two things, really, and it wasn't the plate that made him the way he was . . .*

JOHN KELLY AND CORNELIUS HOLleran, who had drawn the second name on the list—*Henesie, Gowns*—left headquarters about half-past six that night after the usual briefing by Inspector Donnelly, and got over to the Henesie apartment on Central Park West some twenty or twenty-five minutes later.

What they found at Henesie's number appeared to be quite an apartment house, a rich-looking sidewalk awning, not one but two uniformed doormen, and a magnificent cream and gold lobby. For a moment—but only for a moment—they stopped on the pavement and eyed that lobby with the customary trade air of alert and rather menacing contempt; then, not looking at each other, they marched in stolidly and inquired at the desk for Miss Henesie.

She was not home. Soon, however, the house manager was produced from somewhere, and Cornelius Holleran flashed the badge on him, and after that, they were all wafted up elegantly and smoothly to the eighteenth floor.

They found quite a place there, too. A round foyer done in a cool ivory shade, and beyond it, down two steps, a breathtakingly long living room with a couple of oversized windows looking out directly across the park.

Kelly, face to face with that, paused momentarily at the top of

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the foyer steps; Cornelius Holleran, with a brusque and rasping: "Okay, Jack," edged the house manager unceremoniously into the hall and then slammed the door on him. At the far end of the room was a terrace doorway through which Kelly was able to make out a narrow plot of grass bordered by dwarf shrubbery, two stone urns, one white metal table, and two chromium and leather reclining chairs. In the living room itself he saw flowers pleasantly arranged; some swirls and angles of odd but comfortable-looking furniture wrought of waxed pale wood and cool-looking gray upholstery; and a fireplace of fine black marble glittering coldly under the most enormous circular mirror Kelly had ever seen.

He inspected the layout for a moment or two, not overly impressed, but impressed, before going down into it. Cornelius Holleran, a bulky man with a seamed dark face and iron-gray hair, followed him, and still without speaking, the two of them walked through to a small, immaculate dining room, a kitchen, and a back door that led out to the service elevator; after that they crossed the living room again and found Miss Henesie's bedroom.

A closet in there was filled with shelves of hatboxes and shoes, and a long overwhelming row of coats and dresses and tailored suits, all apparently feminine, all apparently Henesie's. Cornelius Holleran pawed curiously through those things and came up at once with a pale blue nightdress about as substantial as spun moonlight.

"Ma—ma," he said, with his first expression of interest. "Look at this. Them French, hey, Kelly?"

"Oh, boy!" Kelly said, but without any particular enthusiasm. He glanced around, sniffed a perfume bottle absently, lighted another cigarette, and went back to the living room. Cornelius Holleran followed him leisurely. "Everything high-class, hey?" he wanted to know.

When Kelly did not answer him, he scowled, grunted something inaudible, and began to move around and touch things with an inquisitive forefinger. Time passed. At a quarter after eight, when the room was beginning to fill with dim shadows, the door in back of them opened and closed. Kelly got up quickly and saw a yellow dress gleaming at him from the top of the foyer steps, a yellow straw hat balanced tentatively over it.

"Hello there," the yellow dress said brightly.

Kelly answered with an impassive nod. Cornelius Holleran flashed the badge again and announced in his extraordinary bass voice who they were.

"I know," the yellow dress said.

An electric button snapped and three or four lamps came on in various parts of the room; then Henesie came down the steps, smil-

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ing at Cornelius Holleran, and dropped the yellow straw hat, a pair of gloves, and a dull-black leather bag on the coffee table. "I heard about you downstairs. You've got poor Mr. Andrews terribly worried."

A tall girl, with very black hair and very white teeth and very clear skin, she gave Kelly a quick but not unfriendly look and the same sort of smile Cornelius Holleran had received.

All the time that they had been waiting here, Kelly had pictured this Henesie to himself as a small shrewd female, ageless but chic, with a birdlike and rather petulant French face. Now, surprised, but not at all intimidated, he cleared his throat and informed her that there wasn't anything to worry about. Did she remember a woman named Mrs. Allen who had been her maid here about a month ago?

"Of course." She ran one hand up through the black hair, shaking it out gracefully. "I've only been able to get a girl in for two days a week since she left me. Why?"

"Sit down, lady," Cornelius Holleran said, closing the wallet over his badge. "He's Kelly. I'm Holleran. Inspector Donnelly sent us over here to see you."

"Oh." She sat down slowly. "Inspector who? I'm not quite sure that I—"

"Acting innocent, hey?" Cornelius Holleran demanded affably. He appeared to have taken an enormous fancy to her at once. "Okay, Kelly. I guess we get out the blackjacks and the rubber hose."

Ignoring that remark, Kelly began to explain the necessary details about the woman who called herself Mrs. Allen or Mrs. Smith or Mrs. Anything-at-all. What she did, or what Inspector Donnelly had come to believe she did, was to hire herself out to single girls, in apartments like this, for a week or so at a time; in a week Mrs. Allen's trained eye could decide whether or not her boss was worth bothering about, and if she were—if jewelry, cash, negotiable bonds or anything else valuable was apparent—Mrs. Allen walked out on her the first pay day with a spare key that she'd had made for the back door.

She never came back. But two or three weeks later her husband did. He had the spare key then, and he knew what to look for; furthermore, he was usually cautious enough to pick a week-end when the tenant didn't answer her phone, and the chances seemed good that she was off somewhere in the country. The thing had worked out very nicely for the past three or four months. And then, the week-end before last—

"Yes?" Henesie said, when Kelly paused. She had altogether exceptional dark blue eyes, and so long as he went on speaking she never seemed to think of moving

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them away from him. Now, however, they widened after a moment, moved quickly to Cornelius Holleran, and back again to Kelly. "Oh! That girl who was found murdered in her apartment over in East 81st Street, you mean? Mrs. Allen worked for *her?*"

Kelly replied with a grim contraction of the lips that he guessed perhaps she had. Inspector Donnelly had been put onto the case and it was discovered that all the girls who had had their apartments ransacked had at one time employed a woman who looked like this Mrs. Allen. Meanwhile, through the employment agencies, the department had located three more places where this Mrs. Allen had worked, but which hadn't been touched yet.

This was one, Kelly added curtly. That's why they were here. From now on, at each of the three apartments, Inspector Donnelly wanted two men on hand from seven o'clock in the evening until seven o'clock the next morning. He was sorry, Kelly said, if their staying here would inconvenience her, but he and Cornelius Holleran had to be around this apartment all night and every night, till Mr. Allen came out of his rathole again.

She had watched him so far with a fascinated but slightly disconcerting regard; now she said very quickly, "Oh, my goodness! Stay here? With *me?*"

"That's the general idea," Kelly said stolidly.

She jumped up at once. "But that's impossible," she said.

Cornelius Holleran became a little aggrieved. "What's the matter?" he said. "We been house guests before, lady. Suppose you look at it this way. What do you think you'll have to worry about with me and Kelly around here?"

"I don't know," she said, obviously rattled. "I'm just—oh, upset, I suppose. Give me a minute to think it over, will you?"

She sat down again and chewed her lower lip for more than the minute she had asked for; once she darted another quick and appraising look at Kelly, who betrayed no consciousness of it. At last she clasped her hands in her lap and gave them a small smile.

"A good many people are going to think it a likely story," she said. "However—" she swallowed bravely, "if you think you can put up with me and a few little idiosyncrasies—don't look so—so professional, gentlemen. May I have your hats?"

As an assignment, of course, it had its points. Even on the most breathless nights of a memorable August they all managed to be very comfortable out on Henesie's terrace, drinking beer or iced tea, and watching the lights on Fifth Avenue. Henesie seemed to be a pretty swell girl, Kelly thought quietly. Not much like Rosemary;

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prettier—a lot prettier—and much more of a homebody. Some evenings she worked over fashion books and had Cornelius Holleran model rolls of material for her. Cornelius Holleran didn't mind at all. He told Kelly that here was certainly a sweetheart; and if he was ten years younger, if he didn't have two kids and the old battleax out in Queens, if he had Kelly's lean looks and—

Kelly made no answer to those elaborate suggestions until the Friday of their first week on Central Park West when Cornelius Holleran, irritated by this complete lack of response, asked sourly whether Kelly knew what was wrong with him.

Every night now, Cornelius Holleran said, he had a chance to get himself in solid with a nice girl who had money, looks, and brains. And what did he do? Moped around; muttered a word or two every other hour. And why? Just because a cheap, double-crossing little floozie like that Rosemary over in Brooklyn Heights—

Kelly spun savagely around; it was seven o'clock at night and they were just walking into the elegant downstairs lobby. "Watch your mouth," Kelly said, very white around his own.

The elevator came then, fortunately perhaps; they rode up in it without speaking. On the eighteenth floor Henesie, wearing a neat black and white outfit and a ridiculous frilled apron, opened the door for them.

"Hi," she said briskly. "How's Cornelius?" She smiled at Kelly, who nodded back at her with very little expression. "Company tonight," she added. "Lots of fun and frolic, Cornelius. You wouldn't want to help me with some sandwiches?"

"Who wouldn't?" Cornelius Holleran said. They went out together, chatting amiably, to the kitchen, while Kelly sat himself down in the living room with a copy of the evening paper. He did not read it; his insides were still cold and upset, and his head—his eggshell head—felt tighter than usual around the temples.

After a while he reached up and touched the plate the doctors had put into the back of his skull after he was shot in a holdup two years ago—touched it carefully and delicately. Even then it felt as if he were reaching inside and putting a finger on the exact center of his brain.

Presently Henesie came in again from the kitchen, Cornelius Holleran trailing her with a sandwich in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. She seemed very vivacious.

"Sedate John Kelly," she said, as if he amused her secretly. "Very aloof tonight. Is he always this quiet, Cornelius, or do parties frighten him?"

She had a lot of things that

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Rosemary had never had. An unaffected cheerfulness;—a kind of inward brightness, Kelly thought. She didn't look at you the way Rosemary had; and that cool, easy friendliness in her voice—Kelly smiled painfully.

"This party might," he said. "What's it for? To show off the apes?"

He had meant it humorously, but in these last six months he had lost the knack of humor, and it did not come out as he had intended. Henesie flushed up from the throat. There was a brief silence. Then Cornelius Holleran put his beer and sandwich down carefully on the coffee table and came over and stopped flatfooted in front of Kelly.

"Well," he said, in his extraordinary bass voice. "You been askin' for it a pretty good while, fella. You been goin' around shootin' off your mouth and actin' smart with people till I got all I can hold of it. On your feet, Kelly. Up before I—"

"Cornelius," Henesie said. She was breathless. "Please, Cornelius. It doesn't matter, really."

"What doesn't matter?" Cornelius Holleran demanded, scowling at her. "You think he's goin' to talk that way to a girl like you just because some bimbo he used to know—"

The doorbell rang. Henesie, now rather white around the mouth, took his arm and moved him over toward the foyer. "Please, Cornelius," she said again, fervently. "It's the company. Remember?"

The company—two girls and three men—did not seem to be aware of any strain. They were all young and pleasant and quite at home, and Cornelius Holleran got on famously with them. Kelly did not. He sat off in the terrace corner, smiling when it seemed called for, but not saying very much. At ten, when Cornelius Holleran began to tell them how the Hauptmann case had been handled by the East 104th Street station, he got up and moved out to the terrace.

It was pleasant there, remote from the voices inside and the Park lights below; there were a few clouds in a great, calm blue sky, and a good many small, dim-silver stars in the tremendous open gulfs between the clouds. The life of the party, Kelly thought; Crazy Kelly, always good for a laugh. Quite a card, the boys down in Centre Street used to think—

Someone came out after him; he knew even before he turned who it was. She carried a tray of sandwiches with her and she was as casual as though nothing at all had happened.

"The chicken's on white," she said. "Take a couple, why don't you? Cornelius must have made three dozen."

"If you had any handy," Kelly said huskily, "I'd take a couple of pounds of rat paste after the crack I pulled in there."

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"St-st-st," Henesie said. "On a night like this?" She put the tray on the table and looked it over critically. Then she said, "I'm sorry you're not enjoying yourself."

Kelly told her that was all right. A headache between his eyes—

"What headache?" she said. "And I don't know that it's all right at all." She picked an olive out of a dish and ate it. "You're not fooling anyone, Kelly. Suppose a girl did run out on you? You'll get over it if you want to. Most people do."

Kelly put his elbows on the stone rail in front of him and looked down eighteen stories into the Park.

"I guess you can," he said stolidly enough, but with a peculiar dryness in his throat. "You know very much about it?"

"No. Not very much." She took another olive. "I suppose that means I'm being very smart and superior again."

"Maybe," Kelly said, overcoming the dryness, "it just means that Cornelius gets a lot of ideas and that they're not all strictly logical."

"Oh," she said. She leaned on the rail too. "So it's more than a girl. You know I had an idea that it was."

Kelly gave her the one-sided, second-rate grin that was about all he could manage these days.

"What was?"

"What's worrying you," she said. "What you're afraid of."

"So I'm afraid," Kelly said, and laughed pretty loudly. He wanted the laugh to make his statement ridiculous; he was not sure whether or not it succeeded in doing that.

"I had a fantastic idea at first," Henesie said. "I thought you were afraid of *me*. Were you? Up home in Boston they spell the name with three e's and two n's and two s's and a y. Hennessey—Catherine Hennessey. Does that make you feel more comfortable?"

"Not a whole lot," Kelly said tightly. "I'll bet you loved the French twist I've been giving it."

"The Henesie, you mean? That's because my partner's a girl named Margaret Sievier. We put the first part of the Hennessey in front of the first part of the Sievier because nothing very elegant came out the other way. Henesie's got just the right professional touch, don't you think?"

"It always seemed to fit you." Kelly said.

That must have been a remark she liked, because she glanced around at him with amused and lovely blue-black eyes. It would have been a lot different being out here with her six months or a year ago; then, Kelly told himself heavily, he would have known just what to say and just how to act with a girl like this. But then, also, he wouldn't have had the memory of Rosemary screaming thinly at him from an infinite distance. Had he ever thought that

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a girl—a normal girl—would marry him? Had he ever imagined that anyone who knew what the doctors had done to him and who understood what, any day and any hour, was liable to happen to him—

Henesie asked quietly, "What's the matter with you? You look like a ghost."

He gave her the stiff grin again; he did not have to think up anything to say to her because in a moment the fellow in the good-looking gabardine suit walked through the doorway and said in an inquiring and rather petulant voice, "Kitty?"

She touched Kelly's arm. "Come on inside," she said.

He muttered something, but after she stopped in the doorway, looked back at him, and went off, he did not go in; he was glad enough just then to be alone.

Every night for the next ten days Kelly and Cornelius Holleran showed up about seven in the evening, sat around with Henesie for three or four hours, then waited and watched until the sun came up blazing over Fifth Avenue for the Mr. Allen who never appeared. When she was with them, Kelly was always reserved; when she was not with them, he spent a lot of time thinking about her—the soft, quick voice she had, the way she looked at him, the straight, cool, graceful way she carried herself. He could not have forgotten her even if he had wanted to, because Cornelius Holleran would not let him.

When she had gone off along the passage to bed Cornelius Holleran would glare at him with narrowed, surly eyes. This, Cornelius Holleran would say, was something that he couldn't understand—not if he lived to be a hundred. The first thing was that she was screwy enough to like Kelly—anyone with half an eye could see that. The second thing was that Kelly hardly ever so much as smiled at her. Was he going to brood about the babe over in Brooklyn Heights all his life? Would he never wake up and see that a sweetheart like Henesie—

After he started on that line, Kelly would get up and move around, out to the kitchen or to the foyer, any place where he wouldn't have to listen. They were a long ten days. Then on the second Saturday of their assignment Henesie asked the two of them to come up early for supper. It was a good supper, served on the terrace, and she looked very slim and charming in a white frock with short, square-cut sleeves and a broad, shiny black belt. Afterward, when she was fixing some more iced tea in the kitchen, Cornelius Holleran nudged Kelly significantly in the ribs.

"All diked out tonight," he said, in the proper conspiratorial whis-

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per. "All diked out every night now. Whenever we come up here it's a new dress and the hair all done up and everything just so. Why do you keep on bein' a dope, stupid? You ought to know who that's for. Not for me. If—"

Henesie came out to them through the darkened living room, raising her brows when Cornelius Holleran stopped guiltily.

"Secrets?" she asked. "Now that's not fair, Cornelius. Not from me."

He gave her a big wink.

"Professional secrets," he said. "They're all right, ain't they?"

Later, against all regulations, he got up and announced off-handedly that he was going out for a cigar and a walk around the block.

Kelly said nothing to that coy suggestion; Henesie frowned slightly and then twisted herself around in the chair to stare after him.

"He's up to something," she said.

"He always is," Kelly said, elaborately casual. He knew that she understood what Cornelius Holleran had meant, but he also thought he could pass it off lightly, that everything could be settled once and for all if only he forced it out into the open; that was the biggest mistake he made. "Just now he's convinced I ought to get married," he said. "Every night after you go to bed he starts to sell me on the idea."

"Oh," Henesie said, before pausing momentarily. "Who's the lucky girl?"

"Who do you think?" Kelly said, not looking at her because she was the kind who never took her eyes away first. "You got quite a fan in Cornelius. He doesn't see that you're the kind of girl who could pick her spots. I wouldn't be one of them. Why should I?"

"I don't know," Henesie said. "But—well, if it comes to that, why shouldn't you?"

Kelly just moved his shoulders. The sky was all pale blue and light had begun to gleam in small, scattered clusters on Fifth Avenue.

"One thing he did tell me," she added thoughtfully, "was that you were a very proud and reticent individual. And that if a girl made a bit more money than you did—"

Kelly tightened his jaws. "Cornelius has a pretty big mouth."

"Hasn't he?" she asked warmly, as if she were in wholehearted agreement. "I'm sure the money wouldn't bother anyone these days. Why should it? I also heard how different you used to be before—before Rosemary. Always merry and bright then, Cornelius said."

"The life of the party," Kelly said, beginning to have some unexpected difficulty with his breathing. "You hear the name they had for me—Crazy Kelly? Now it means something a lot different. Now it means Crazy Kelly with the hole in his head."

"So that's it." Henesie mur-

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mured softly. "Cornelius told me about that. But I can't see that it means anything."

Kelly, flipping a pebble off into space, said that the Army had seen what it meant, even if they had claimed they were turning him down for an old football knee. Rosemary had seen what it meant, too; probably everyone had seen it before Kelly did himself. He had been unconscious for five weeks after it happened; then they brought up a brain surgeon from Baltimore and everything seemed to work out fine.

"Seemed to?" Henesie said, watching him even while she lighted a cigarette. "Hasn't it?"

He moved his head; the flesh under his eyes was dark. "Sure," he said, one side of his mouth curled up bitterly. "A hundred per cent. Okay, Kelly—you're sound as a dollar, they said in the hospital. Go home now and forget about the plate we put in if it's worrying you. Go home and marry the girl you got and raise yourself half a dozen little cops."

"Only," Henesie said, in a conventional tone, "Rosemary wasn't having any of that. And you thought—tell me something, Kelly. Tell me exactly what happened between you and Rosemary."

He leaned forward over the stone rail; for a moment it appeared that he wasn't going to answer her. Then he said huskily, "It didn't happen right away—not until I found out about some old friends she was seeing on the side and argued with her about it. She was all right at first and then when I began to ask her about a week-end when she was supposed to be visiting her mother, she began to scream things at me."

"What kind of things?"

"Enough," Kelly said his cheeks pasty. "So that I understood how the doctors were kidding me. I'll go on all right with this cracked-eggshell head until I trip on a sidewalk or some drunk crowns me with a beer bottle. When that happens, nobody from Baltimore is going to straighten me out again. You know what they'll do then, don't you? They'll put me off in a nice quiet room with barred windows and a lot of fellows in white coats waiting around. Everything set—the old strait jacket right out if you try to get tough about it. The—"

"Well," Henesie said, taking a long, angry breath, "if that isn't the most asinine and ridiculous—that Rosemary started it, of course. She wanted to hurt you, and she did. Just because—"

The telephone rang inside, suddenly and shrilly; she gave a small, annoyed exclamation and got up to answer it. At the same moment Kelly, who had never been so glad to hear anything in his life, put his arm out and stopped her.

"This might be our friend," he said thickly. "He'd call first, and

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then he'll call again in a couple of minutes just to make sure. If you don't answer, he'll come around to look the apartment over from the street to see whether you have any lights on up here. Then—"

He wet his lips. He had just thought that if it were Mr. Allen, he himself wouldn't be coming back here tomorrow night, or ever again. And it was dark up here, and Henesie was practically in his arms because of the way he had stopped her. "You know what was funny?" he whispered in a painful, almost breathless voice. "The way Cornelius used to argue about you. As if, the first night you came down those steps—here's something I want you to know. I've forgotten Rosemary. But if I forget you—"

"You won't forget me," Henesie said, very calm and determined about it. "I won't give you the chance. Hold still, Kelly."

He held still; he was numb, but he could feel his heart beating. What followed then was not practiced, like Brooklyn Heights; she didn't even know how to hold her head. Kelly kissed her somewhere, her cheek, the side of her mouth.

"Wait a minute," Kelly whispered. "This isn't—"

The phone rang again, on and on, and when it stopped Henesie pushed away from him.

"You better not forget me," she said breathlessly. "Now I'll find Cornelius. You'll need help."

"All right," Kelly said. He knew who had kissed him; Henesie had kissed him. "Look," he said, as lightheaded as if he were not breathing air at the moment, but pure oxygen. "I tell you what to do, baby. You get the boys from the East 104th Street station up here. They're the cream."

"Oh, you fool!" Henesie said. She ran across to the foyer door and out without closing it. A second or so later she put her head back in and said in a fierce, shaky voice, "You be careful."

"Who?" Kelly said, making a fist at her. Everything was just right; everything was exactly as it should have been; but of course, the lightheadedness endured only until he floated himself out to the kitchen door. Then he remembered suddenly and flatly that he was still Kelly with the eggshell head. Nothing had changed that; nothing could change it.

He wet his lips again. He'd remember this evening, he thought—remember it as long as he remembered anything. But—the elevator went up outside; he thought he heard it stop about two floors above, and he rubbed his right palm carefully against his shirt and got out the service revolver. Then he waited again, not so long this time. Somebody came down the stairs very quietly, put a key in the lock, started in; somebody reached one hand around for the light button just as Kelly got the gun up

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and inches deep into this guy's armpit with one smooth, unhurried movement.

"Easy does it," Kelly said, pretty well satisfied with himself. "Keep the hands where I can see them. Don't—"

It was timed just right—every detail perfect; the only thing he had not anticipated was that there would be two of them. The one out in the hall betrayed himself by a quick scuffle of feet and a smothered exclamation, then jumped away toward the stairs. Kelly, ducking around quickly, fired twice at him and saw him fall but the guy still inside the kitchen, the one who couldn't get out because Kelly was in his way, smashed Kelly in the side of the jaw and then got both hands on his gun wrist.

They wobbled around Henesie's nice kitchen table. They bumped into the sink, and Kelly lost his gun. After that, they fell with Kelly underneath. Then the man was standing over him with a kitchen chair raised high above his head, and Cornelius Holleran was bellowing out in the living room, and something smashed down at Kelly but did not stop him from getting up. He caught the man halfway to the kitchen door, swung him around, and dropped him with a beautiful right hook into Henesie's Chinese-red kitchen cabinet. A dish fell on his head, exactly as it would have done in one of those two-reel slapstick movies; then Cornelius Holleran had him, and Kelly was past them both, out onto the landing; the man he had shot at was still out cold.

Later, when the men from the precinct had come and gone, Henesie said something about getting a nice cold cloth for that bump on Kelly's head.

"What bump?" Kelly said, putting up one hand carelessly. "He never touched me. He swung once, but—"

It felt very big, though; it felt enormous. Over in the mirror Kelly stared at it, from two or three angles, for half a minute. Then he turned; his throat had closed up almost completely.

"What did that?" he croaked.

Henesie curled her forefinger at him several times in a come-after-me gesture. She didn't say anything at all. In the kitchen—they had done a lot of damage out there in thirty or forty seconds, Kelly thought absently—she pointed without a word at a solid-looking white chair that had one of its cross legs snapped off cleanly in the middle. Kelly stared at it; then he touched it. Hard wood, he thought.

"Practically unbreakable," Henesie said, as if she'd read his mind. "He'd have killed any one with sense. So what do you think about that eggshell head of yours now?"

"I don't know," Kelly said. He did, of course; Henesie did, too.

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They went out to the terrace and watched Cornelius Holleran and the men from the precinct and the two casualties disperse themselves in a couple of squad cars. Just before he got in the car, Cornelius Holleran looked up in their direction and gave them one of those grandiose, winning prize-fight gestures—hands clasped above his head. Henesie gave it back.

"That was for luck," Kelly said, altogether unnecessarily. "You figure you'll be needing some?"

"Well," Henesie said, and pondered over it for a moment or two, "I don't know why I should. Not now. Not unless you're going to go back to Brooklyn Heights and forget me."

"I'll forget you," Kelly said. But it was a threat, not a promise; there was a wonderful new moon coming up over Fifth Avenue, and he knew when he looked at it, if he knew anything at all, that he had never been so far from Brooklyn Heights in his life.

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THE WOMEN IN HIS LIFE

by WHIT MASTERSON

(continued from page 73)

MEG RETURNED TO THE FARMhouse with a sense of accomplishment. She hadn't yet got her teeth into the whole truth but she was at least nibbling at the edges. John Lamarr, once of New York and now of San Francisco . . . this morning they had not even known that such a man existed.

It was dark when she parked her car in the farmhouse garage and walked quickly along the gravel path to the door. She did not see the man standing on the porch until she was almost on him. His sudden materialization out of the shadows made her gasp with fright.

"You Miss Blair?" he asked. Meg got back her breath as she saw the telegram envelope in his hand. "I was just about to give up when I saw your car."

She signed for the message with trembling fingers. She had to grin at her taut nerves. With the mysterious John Lamarr haunting her mind, her first reaction had been . . . Calm down, girl, she admonished herself, this is the last place in the world he'd come now. Nevertheless, she locked the door before she tore open the envelope.

THINK I HAVE FOUND SOLUTION. MEET ALEXIS AND ME AT MERRIMAN PENTHOUSE SOONEST.

TERESA.

Meg felt a surge of exultation. She rushed across the big living room to call the airport. *Think I have found solution* . . . Teresa had probably tried to telephone her and, receiving no answer, had sent the telegram. Rereading the message, she inquired for the first reservation for Chicago and learned she would be unable to secure a seat earlier than eleven o'clock.

"All right, I guess that will have to do. The name is Blair. Meg—" Suddenly she halted, frowning, struck by something odd about the telegram that she had failed to notice in her first excitement. The message didn't really sound like Teresa; it contained none of the flamboyance so typical of her. It was too terse, too much to the point, not even a "love" at the end—which to Teresa would be an unthinkable omission. Besides, Meg thought, she never called her Alexis in her life; it was always Alex . . .

"Are you still there?" the voice of the airline reservation clerk inquired in her ear. "Shall I put you down for the eleven o'clock?"

"Yes," Meg said slowly. "Please do."

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Meg picked up the phone again and called Chicago. Teresa was not in her room and the desk clerk had not seen her. Immediately, Meg put in a call to San Francisco. Alexis had checked out shortly before. Disturbed, Meg hung up. Alexis' departure, contrary to instructions, argued that she had received a similar telegram and was already bound for Chicago. Were they being summoned into a trap?

"Perhaps I'm just being jumpy." Yet in any case—whether the telegram was valid or a fake—she had little choice except to heed its command. She had to go to Chicago.

She was still brooding beside the telephone when she heard an automobile turn into the drive and come to a stop. Her nerves jumped to the alert again. She waited for the newcomer to ring the bell. But though she waited, the minutes crept by without bringing a summons to answer the door. Meg began to experience real fright. She was alone in the big house, cut off from the rest of the world—except for the telephone, and her hand went out to seize it. Even the police were too far away to help her now. She glanced around desperately for a weapon and then drew her nail file from her purse. She tiptoed across to the front door, listening, scarcely breathing.

After a moment Meg thought she directed a faint sound on the opposite side of the panel, as if someone else stood outside in much the same manner as she. For a few seconds longer the stalemate continued. Then came the unmistakable sound of footsteps, quietly retreating from the porch. A moment later an engine purred and a car drove away.

Cautiously, Meg opened the door. She was alone. Holding onto the door jamb she peered around, still shaken, still wondering. Something burned her fingers and she became aware of an acrid odor. Looking down, she discovered a small puddle of colorless liquid on the sill. It was sulphuric acid.

Looking at the door, on which the paint was already beginning to blister, Meg understood. It was a warning—the threat which would be calculated, above all others, to frighten a woman. This could happen to you, the searing liquid was supposed to say.

Meg had no doubt as to who had delivered the message. The nature of the warning was too clearly feminine to come from anyone but Vivian Dobrecht. "All right, you scared me," Meg said aloud. "But not enough to keep me from seeing that portrait of your husband."

She had ample time before her flight to Chicago. She packed what little she thought would be required, threw the overnight case into her automobile, and returned for the second time that day to the Dobrecht estate. It was dark. Meg left her car a short distance down

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the road and cut across the lawns, circling the mansion. Stealthily she approached the rear door and found it locked. "I might as well be a burglar too," she muttered and worked on the simple lock with her nail file until it opened.

Unlike a burglar, however, she had neglected to bring a flashlight but her cigarette lighter enabled her to get her bearings. She was aided by the white-shrouded furniture which loomed up like ghosts. The thick carpeting did not give away her presence as she crept upstairs and searched for the attic door. It too was locked but this time her nail file failed her. Frustrated, Meg debated trying to pry the door open. But she realized that this would be too noisy. Vivian Dobrecht had apparently retired but the sound of the attic door splintering would certainly rouse her. That left only one other course: she had to get the key to the attic door.

She began to investigate the upstairs bedrooms, opening each door with the expectation that she would be challenged. But she was not and she came at last to the room where Vivian slept. Meg slipped inside and pressed herself against the dark wall, waiting tensely to learn if her entrance had disturbed the blonde woman's slumbers. Vivian did not stir. As Meg's eyes became more accustomed to the gloom she made out the shape of a medicine bottle on the bedside table, a water tumbler beside it. Vivian's deep regular breathing confirmed her guess: she had hastened sleep through the use of sedatives.

Meg crossed to the dressing table, moving quietly but no longer with the fear that her stealthy movements would waken the other woman. Vivian's dress was thrown carelessly across the chair. Meg thought she detected the odor of the sulphuric acid still clinging to it. Vivian's purse was there too, but it did not contain the keys she sought. She turned to the dresser itself, and began to rummage through the drawers.

The first drawer contained only papers; she put them aside. As she did so, the top sheet attracted her attention. It was an official document and Meg's first thought was that it might be a death certificate. She snapped open her cigarette lighter.

The paper was nothing as macabre as she had imagined. On the contrary, it was the application for a marriage license, recently expired. It bore the great seal of the state of Maryland, but what made Meg's eyes widen in surprise and sudden understanding were the names of the applicants. Vivian Dobrecht . . . and John Lamarr.

She replaced the marriage license in the drawer. She did not bother to continue her search for the missing key. It was no longer necessary. Instead, she made her

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way out of the house, this time through the front door, her stealth forgotten.

It began to make sense now—all of it. There were still questions to be answered and confirmation to be sought, but these would come. Perhaps in Chicago . . .

"Western Union," she said aloud as she started the car. "I can play that game, too—and we might as well make it a party."

She had plenty of time to reach the airport before her flight. She stopped at the first phone booth she found . . .

It was a half hour past midnight when Meg arrived at the Merriman Arms. She did not proceed directly to the penthouse but chose a seat in the lobby where she could watch the hotel entrance. She waited, an inconspicuous figure in black amid the more gaily dressed couples who streamed between the hotel's cocktail lounge and night club.

One o'clock struck, and she began to wonder if her scheme had miscarried. Then, as she was debating her next move, she saw Vivian Dobrecht enter the revolving door. The blonde woman's face was strained and anxious, and her eyes were puffy. Meg trailed along unobtrusively as Vivian approached the desk.

"Does the elevator go all the way to the penthouse?" Vivian inquired of the desk clerk. "I'm expected."

"The penthouse controls are on the left. The rest of your party has already gone up."

"Rest of my party?" Vivian repeated blankly. "Thank you."

As soon as the elevator doors had closed behind her, Meg rushed forward to push the recall button, hoping that no one on the upper floors had a prior claim on the automatic elevator. It was impossible to arrive at the penthouse simultaneously with Vivian, but she wanted to be close behind.

The elevator returned almost immediately, empty. Meg entered and manipulated the control that would take her to the rendezvous. The car shot upward, and now that she had reached the point of no return Meg wondered for the first time if she were not being foolhardy. Perhaps the police . . . but it was too late for that now. The elevator was gliding to a stop, the doors were opening—she was there.

She faced a massive teak door at the end of a short corridor. Vivian Dobrecht had already disappeared behind it. But it stood ajar and from the room beyond Meg could hear Vivian's voice, raised in shock and anger.

"What do you mean, I shouldn't have come?" she was demanding. "What about your telegram?"

"Are you out of your mind?" a man's voice replied harshly. "I didn't send you any telegram."

"But you must have sent it! If you didn't then who—"

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Meg pushed open the door. "I did," she said and stepped inside to face the man and woman who stood in the foyer. They spun around at the sound of her voice. "I pretended to be a Western Union operator when I phoned you, Mrs. Dobrecht. I counted on your being too sleepy to remember my voice. And I didn't want you to be left out—oh, no."

Vivian's mouth sagged but her companion recovered quickly. He was a tall slim man, mustached and deeply tanned. His dark gray-streaked hair was somewhat disheveled and there was a long scratch on his left cheek. He said gently, "Miss Blair, I take it?"

Meg inclined her head. "Mr. Lamarr. Doesn't it make you nervous to hijack another man's apartment?"

Vivian muttered, "She came to see me."

"And you evidently told her plenty," Lamarr snapped. He regarded Meg appraisingly, as if deciding how best to handle her. "No, Miss Blair. Our need to talk is so important that I'm gambling we won't be interrupted here. Come into the living room."

"First you tell me about Alexis and Teresa," Meg said, not moving from the doorway. "Otherwise, I'm going to scream for the police."

"There's nothing to scream about," Lamarr assured her. "Your friends are waiting for you inside. Shall we join them?"

"After you." Meg followed the other two cautiously into the spacious living room. She was relieved to see Alexis, hunched in a large chair near the grand piano. The girl was white-faced and her eyes held a glint of tears. Alexis sprang up as she saw Meg and ran to embrace her.

"Thank God you're here!" she quavered. In a whisper, she added, "He has a gun!"

Lamarr said, "I've tried to reassure Miss Gilmore that she had nothing whatever to fear. Unfortunately, she wouldn't believe me."

"Where's Teresa?" Meg inquired as she patted Alexis' quivering shoulders.

"She was even less cooperative than Miss Gilmore." Lamarr fingered the scratch on his cheek. "I had to lock her in the den. Vivian, it's that door over there. Will you open it, please?"

Vivian did as he requested, her face still reflecting her confusion. Teresa appeared warily. She held an ebony statuette like a club. She halted in surprise on seeing Meg. "So he got you here, too," she said despondently. "I thought you'd have better sense, pet." She had been gashed over her left eye; the blood had dried in a small jagged line like a second eyebrow.

"Are you hurt?" Meg asked anxiously.

"Only my face. Of course, that's bad enough."

"Please sit down," John Lamarr

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ordered. He remained standing in the center of the big room, an elegant figure, completely at ease. "I must apologize for bringing you here by a trick. I only did it because I was afraid that, had I signed my own name, you would have notified the police and that would have been disastrous."

"You bet it would," Alexis said. "For you."

"For all of us," Lamarr amended, unruffled. "Miss Tolan tells me that you ladies believe I killed Lewis Gilmore."

"I'm glad we understand each other," Meg said. "It saves time."

"However, you're mistaken. I am not a murderer. I did not kill Lewis Gilmore. Contrary to what you believe, Lew killed himself. I realize that's hard for you to accept, but I want you to know the truth before you expose something that would be even more damaging to Lew's reputation than his suicide."

"How about Calvin?" Teresa burst out. "Meg—Otto Merriman's houseman is lying dead in the front closet. I suppose Calvin committed suicide, too!"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Lamarr said. "It was an unfortunate accident. We were struggling for possession of the package, he fell and struck his head on the table there. I tried to revive him but apparently his heart was bad." He paused. "Speaking on a strictly moral basis, Calvin's death is more your responsibility than mine."

"I'd like to know how you arrive at that conclusion," Meg said quietly.

"Because you insisted on stirring things up instead of leaving them alone. If you hadn't interfered, I would have been able to work things out with Otto Merriman when he returned. Merriman already knew the whole story and he would have realized the wisdom of letting sleeping dogs lie. But I absolutely could not allow the package to fall into the hands of outsiders."

"Just what was in the package that was so important?" Alexis demanded.

Lamarr hesitated. "I could refuse to answer that and I'd be safe enough since I burned the damned thing in the fireplace this afternoon. But I want to be completely honest with you, even though the truth may hurt. What the package contained were the forged accounts of the New York Associated Charities Drive of five years ago. Perhaps you recall that Lew was on the board of directors of that drive. Did you ever wonder why he never served again?"

"Dad was very busy," Alexis said. "He didn't have the time."

"The forged accounts," Lamarr repeated deliberately. "But let me tell you the whole story, before you think I'm trying to shift the whole blame to Lew's shoulders. There were others on that same board of directors. Among them were

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Walter Dobrecht and myself. Lew and I had a good deal in common. We were young, ambitious—and rather short of cash, despite our glowing reputations. I was in advertising, by the way. And Walter Dobrecht"—he glanced quickly at Vivian—"was a brilliant man, a criminal lawyer who was beginning to fall prey to his associations. Together, the three of us looted the charity funds. It was easy to do since Walter was the chairman and directly responsible for the money. And since this was a pioneer attempt to combine the drives of many charities, we had all the confusion of a new organization working our way. We took approximately $150,000, enough to split comfortably three ways but not enough to make a cover-up impossible. And we would have got away with it—except . . ."

He paused and Teresa, fascinated, prompted, "Except what?"

"Except that Walter Dobrecht was killed in an automobile accident. A new chairman—Otto Merriman—was appointed, and the truth came out. There wasn't much the board could do about it, of course. To make the theft public would have destroyed every charity drive for years to come. They decided to hush it up. Since they were all wealthy men, they were able to make up the deficit among themselves. Of course, Lew and I paid for it in other ways, myself most of all, I think. As an artist, Lew's position didn't depend upon trust. My own position was somewhat different. I found all doors closed to me—the whispers got around, naturally. At last I gave up and went out to San Francisco and started again at the bottom."

"With approximately fifty thousand dollars," Meg added mildly. She did not look at him but commenced to file her nails.

"I discovered the truth of that old adage, Miss Blair. Money really isn't everything." His voice was low and intense. "For one thing, Vivian and I wanted to get married. I'd been in love with her even before Walter's death. But under the circumstances we've had to wait and wait and wait—until the past could be forgotten. Then, last week, just when I believed it had been forgotten, Lew came to San Francisco."

"And you saw each other at lunch," Alexis interposed.

"It was quite a shock. To Lew also, I imagine. But when I talked with him I was even more upset to discover how deeply he still felt his guilt. As an artist perhaps he was more sensitive than I. I'm not sure. But the remorse Lew felt had reached the proportions where he told me he was contemplating suicide. I thought, given a little time, I could talk him out of it. Instead, Lew flew home. I was so concerned over what he might do that I followed him." He sighed. "To my everlasting sorrow I ar-

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rived too late. You know the rest."

"Why couldn't he have waited?" Vivian choked back a sob. "We've paid enough, John and I. How long do we have to go on paying?"

Lamarr looked slowly around the circle. "So there's the whole truth at last. I've done all I can. Now it's in your hands. Do you want the story to come out, or shall we bury it in this room tonight—forever?"

In the moment of silence that followed, the throbbing earnestness of his low-pitched voice seemed to linger in the air. Alexis stared at him as if mesmerized and there were traces of tears in Teresa's eyes. The mood prevailed an instant longer and then it was shattered by the jarring sound of Meg's scornful laugh.

"Oh, well done!" was her mocking compliment. "A simply breathtaking performance. Your story has everything—intrigue, romance, pathos—and just enough truth to make the whole thing palatable to a trio of gullible women."

"Believe me, Miss Blair—"

"No," Meg interrupted, pointing her nail file at him like an accusing finger. "Believe you is exactly what I do not. You think you can frighten us into keeping quiet to protect Lew's good name while you get away with murder."

"I don't blame you in the least for defending Lew. If our positions were reversed, I'd do the same thing."

"I'm not defending Lew. I'm accusing you. Your story is full of holes, Mr. Lamarr. Lew didn't have time to talk to you in San Francisco as you claim. We know his time schedule backward and forward."

"There's such a thing as the telephone," Lamarr said quickly. "I didn't claim we met face to face."

"Face to face," Meg repeated. "That's very appropriate. But, first, what about the money Lew was supposed to have stolen? Where did it go? He didn't spend it—Alexis and Teresa can vouch for that. And as far as feeling remorseful enough to kill himself, you're being ridiculous. It just wasn't in Lew's character to feel remorse. If he had been a criminal, he would have been the happiest and most conscienceless criminal in the world."

"You were in love with him. Naturally, you'd feel this way."

"Love does not necessarily blind a woman, Mr. Lamarr. Sometimes it even improves her vision. Right now I can see all the way through your story to the truth." Lamarr made a movement to interrupt but Meg gestured imperiously with the nail file. "I listened to your story. Now you listen to mine. I'm willing to believe there was a looting of the charity funds five years ago, and I don't doubt that it was hushed up by the board of directors—including Lew—and the money replaced. But that embezzlement

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was solely the work of one man—the chairman, Walter Dobrecht. You wanted Dobrecht's money and you wanted Dobrecht's wife, and so Vivian and you worked it out. Walter Dobrecht had to be put out of the way—in a cleverly contrived accident." Meg turned sharply on Vivian. "How does it feel to marry your husband's murderer, Mrs. Dobrecht?"

Vivian shrank back in her chair. But John Lamarr only chuckled wearily. "Really, Miss Blair—if my story is full of holes, what about your own? I gather that what you're driving at is that I not only killed Walter Dobrecht but that I also killed Lew to prevent his betraying me. Does this actually make sense to you? Surely, if I'm the murderer you believe—and Lew had known of it—would he have waited five years to reveal my guilt, or would I have waited five years to shut him up? I'm afraid your emotions have got the better of your logic."

"That's right," Meg admitted. "Lew would never have accused you of killing Walter Dobrecht. Lew would have accused you of *being Walter Dobrecht!* That's why you shot him, isn't it, Mr. Lamarr?"

There was a concerted gasp from Alexis and Teresa, and Vivian Dobrecht mumbled something indistinguishable. Lamarr's face was completely expressionless; only his eyes were alive, hard and bleak. Meg smiled slightly. "No objections, counselor? Of course, you've been out of practice for five years but I thought your courtroom manner was still quite convincing."

"Let me warn you about slander," Lamarr mumbled, scarcely moving his lips.

"Yes, you've altered your face quite a bit. I've been studying you and the scars are barely detectable. Naturally, a good criminal lawyer would know where to go to have this done. I wonder if you tried to change your fingerprints, too—I hear that's much harder. That's why the body they found in the station wagon had to be burned. Who was he? Some poor hitchhiker, I suppose, who would never be missed. And with Walter Dobrecht buried and John Lamarr a whole continent away in San Francisco, who would ever discover the deception? By the way, it was a very clever touch, having John Lamarr listed as one of Walter Dobrecht's pallbearers—very clever. It gave such an air of authenticity to it all." Meg turned again to Vivian. "How does it feel to remarry your old husband with a new face?"

Alexis said, "I'm not sure I understand. Dad only saw him in a mirror—down a long room . . ."

"You mean why he would recognize Lamarr as Dobrecht when no one else did? Well, Lew painted Walter Dobrecht's portrait once and it was his method to probe beneath the surface—even into such

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things as bone structure—and plastic surgery can't alter that much. Actually, Lew knew Dobrecht inside out and when he saw him again in San Francisco he literally saw right through him. That skull doodle. I put all the wrong interpretations on it—what it amounted to was a refreshening of Lew's memory." Meg glanced at Lamarr, speaking almost conversationally. "Unfortunately, you saw Lew too, and his expression must have given him away. Lew was never much of an actor. So he had to be shut up before he revealed the truth. I imagine you intended to do the job in San Francisco but Lew left too quickly. So you followed him to the farmhouse. You caught him there but he was still a trifle too quick for you. He'd already mailed the package to Otto Merriman—undoubtedly the preliminary sketches for your old portrait plus some additional sketches of your new face."

"Wait a minute," Teresa said. "How did he know there was a package at all?"

"Why, Lew told him. Not intentionally—but when Lew got home he phoned Mrs. Dobrecht. Naturally, he thought she should be the first to know that he had seen her supposedly dead husband. It was naive of him, but how was Lew to know that they were in it together?"

"I see. That's why Lamarr came to Chicago—to get the sketches."

"And he's been waiting here a whole week, waiting for Calvin to come back from vacation and open the safe downstairs where Merriman's mail was being kept. And just when it appeared to be clear sailing, there's Teresa spooking around. He had to find out how much Teresa knows—but it's not just Teresa, there are two more women poking around. So he had to gather us all here to see if he could sweet-talk us or scare us out of blowing his new life wide open." Meg studied Lamarr as if he were a specimen. "It's been a hard week, hasn't it—to believe you'd won and then lose, after all?"

Lamarr's face was stiff; his lips seemed to move with a great effort. "You wouldn't have talked so long if you didn't have a deal in mind. What is it you want—the money?"

"No deal," Meg told him coldly. "I've already got what I wanted—to see you squirm—since I won't be present when they electrocute you."

Lamarr's hand dug into his coat pocket and emerged holding a small automatic pistol. "You're better at reconstructing the past than you are at foretelling the future, Miss Blair. Take another look in your crystal ball."

Alexis and Teresa froze before the menace of the gun but Meg merely laughed. "Your nerves are really shot. You're through, Mr. Lamarr—or Dobrecht, if you prefer. Do you suppose you can

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murder all three of us and get away with it?"

Alexis said quickly, "The police are already on your trail. I met one of them, Lieutenant Stock, in San Francisco. By now he's probably followed me here." Her voice did not betray how improbable she believed this was.

"And Otto Merriman is expected back any minute," Teresa added.

"There are three of us," Meg pointed out. "The odds are against you, Mr. Lamarr. You'd better give me the gun now."

"Shut up!" Lamarr commanded hoarsely. He cast a desperate glance at Vivian. "Why don't you say something? You're in this, too, you know!"

Vivian cleared her throat painfully. "You have to understand what a shock this has been to me," she said, and she seemed to be speaking more to Meg than to the man. "Naturally, I assumed that Walter was dead—I never in the world would have guessed that Walter and John were the same man."

"Vivian!" Lamarr said in a shocked whisper. "What are you saying?"

"I'd like to stand by you," Vivian said hurriedly, "but under the circumstances I don't have much choice. I'm sorry, Walter."

"The ship is sinking," Meg told him. "You're all alone. Now it's four against one." Though apparently cool, she was shaking inwardly. The strains of the day—and particularly the last hour—were telling on her as well as on Lamarr. She realized that Lamarr, panicky, was capable of a last desperate act. He was already guilty of three murders. One more—or four more—would hardly matter to him. Meg inched forward to the edge of her chair, watching the gun muzzle that swung this way and that, and prayed for some distraction. Anything, just to give them an opportunity . . . "You'd better hand over the gun."

"No," Lamarr breathed huskily "I can do it alone. No one knows the truth except you and . . ." His distraught face set in harsh lines of resolution. He took a quick step forward, the gun muzzle swinging up.

The sudden loud chime of the doorbell came as the answer to Meg's prayer. Lamarr, surprised, halted and for just a moment his head turned instinctively toward the front door. At that same instant Meg shouted and sprang at him. Her cry acted as a call to arms for Teresa and Alexis. They flung themselves like a trio of panthers, clawing, kicking, on their enemy. Vivian Dobrecht screamed as the gun exploded. The three women and the man careened to the floor in a tangled heap of flailing arms and legs.

For a moment longer the melee continued. Then, slowly and si-

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lently, three of the participants arose, staring down at the fourth who lay motionless on the carpet at their feet. John Lamarr stared back—through eyes that no longer could see them.

Fists were pounding on the front door. Panting, Meg said, "Somebody better let them in," and Alexis stumbled away to do her bidding. When her shaking fingers succeeded in turning the latch, the door was thrown violently open and Lieutenant Stock stood there, flanked by a pair of uniformed policemen.

"Oh, thank God!" Alexis gasped and collapsed against him.

Stock half carried her back into the living room. His eyes snapped around at Meg and Teresa, standing disheveled in the middle of the room, at Vivian sobbing in a chair —and finally at the man on the floor. John Lamarr's face—the new face he had killed to protect—was now no face at all. It was a blank mask of ragged nail furrows, oozing red.

From his chest protruded the jade handle of a nail file.

Stock said, "What in hell has been going on here?"

"It's a long story," Meg said. She drew a deep breath. "But a strangely satisfying one."

On an afternoon a few days later three women had a drink together in a dimlit cocktail lounge in Manhattan, not far from the Brinker Galleries. In a city of good-looking women there was nothing about them to attract any particular attention. One was dressed in black but this was not unusual for a career girl, and the small bandage over the eye of one of the others was not too conspicuous.

"My doctor's such a gem," Teresa said, touching the adhesive tape fondly. "He doesn't think the scar will show. I'm not sure I'd mind, anyway. It might even give me a dangerous look."

"Aren't you dangerous enough already?" Meg asked, smiling. "But I suppose we all have our scars, one kind or another."

Alexis said, "Andy told me last night that they've exhumed the Dobrecht coffin, trying to find out who really was buried in it. I guess it doesn't make much difference now, though. Vivian has told them everything. What do you suppose will happen to her?"

"I don't know," Meg admitted. "She's a convincing talker—and not bad-looking, besides. She'll survive. Actually, we owe her a lot. If she hadn't been afraid to let me see the portrait, I might never have started thinking along the right line. Especially since there was nothing in the portrait itself to give Lamarr away."

"You'd have figured it out," Teresa told her admiringly. "And by the way, how did that cute policeman of yours know where you were, Alex?"

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Alexis blushed. "Oh, it wasn't too hard. When Andy found out I'd received a telegram, he went to Western Union and demanded to see the original. Then he caught the next plane to Chicago. Pretty lucky for us, too."

"Speak for yourself, pet," Teresa admonished her. She studied her cocktail glass. "Well, since it's all over now and this is just between us girls—do any of us know which one stabbed him?"

Neither of the other two women spoke for a moment. Finally, Alexis said, "Things happened so fast. Of course, it was your nail file, Meg."

"I dropped it when the fight began," Meg said quietly. "One of us picked it up. Why don't we just leave it at that? It doesn't really matter—and this way we can consider we did it together."

"Amen," Teresa added.

Alexis glanced at her wrist watch. "Oh, golly! I've got to run. I'm meeting Andy at four—and he doesn't like to be kept waiting." She rose. "I'll see you again soon. Let's always keep in touch."

They watched her hurry out and Meg raised her glass. "To romance," she said.

"She's young," Teresa said with a trace of wistfulness. "She'll learn why it's necessary to keep men waiting. Cures their overconfidence." She sighed. "Of course, that doesn't apply to directors who are barely human—and I do have that foolish rehearsal . . ."

"Goodbye," Meg told her. "I'll be cheering for you opening night"

"You're sweet, pet. I'll drop in and buy a picture some day—when I can afford it."

She moved away across the lounge toward the door and Meg noticed how heads turned to observe her. She lifted her glass again. "To success," she murmured.

And now she was alone, a solitary figure in black. Not really alone, Meg thought. She raised her glass in a final toast. "To us, Lew," she said softly.

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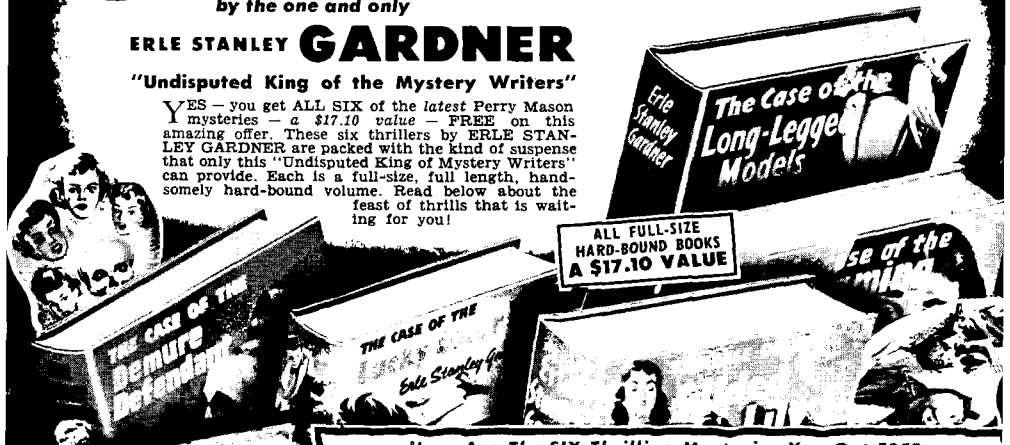
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